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**AIR POWER AND LIMITED WAR:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE AIR CAMPAIGNS AGAINST NORTH VIETNAM
AS INSTRUMENTS OF NATIONAL POLICY**

by

R. Mark A. Clodfelter

**A Dissertation submitted to the faculty of The University
of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of History.**

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ROMIE MARK ALLEN CLODFELTER. Air Power and Limited War: An Analysis of the Air Campaigns against North Vietnam as Instruments of National Policy. (Under the direction of JAMES R. LEUTZE.)

→ A Clausewitzian evaluation of the three American air campaigns against North Vietnam (Rolling Thunder, March 1965--October 1968; Linebacker I, May--October 1972; and Linebacker II, December 1972) reveals that they differed significantly in their effectiveness as political instruments. Rolling Thunder contributed little towards President Lyndon Johnson's goal of an independent, stable, non-Communist South Vietnam. Limiting the air campaign's effectiveness were: Johnson's political controls on bombing, which stemmed from disparate objectives that restrained the application of military force; civilian leaders' failure to agree on the campaign's purpose; the air chiefs' persistent belief that destroying vital industries would ultimately destroy an enemy's capability and will to fight; the reluctance of both civilian and military leaders to target civilians; the guerrilla nature of the Southern war prior to 1968, which produced minimal external logistical requirements for Communist forces; the inefficient military management of the air war; and the monsoons that hampered flying for six months each year.

President Richard Nixon's goal in Vietnam was an American withdrawal that did not abandon the South to an imminent Communist takeover. His two Linebacker campaigns helped achieve this objective. Nixon's bombing succeeded as a political tool for a number of reasons: his aims were more limited than Johnson's; his diplomatic coups in China and the Soviet Union, combined with the continued departure of American ground troops and the blatant aggression of North Vietnam's 1972 Easter Offensive, eliminated many of the political controls that had restrained Rolling Thunder; the conventional nature of the Easter Offensive suited the tenets of American



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strategic bombing doctrine; the development of "smart" bombs vastly improved precision-bombing capability; and the timing of the Northern assault, which came just prior to the maximum period of favorable flying weather.

Despite many air chiefs' claims that Linebacker II vindicated their strategic bombing doctrine, the examination of air power's efficacy in Vietnam provides no concrete models for the future. Instead, the analysis demonstrates that air power's political effectiveness varies according to many diverse elements; to assume that a specific formula for applying air power guarantees success would be folly.

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PREFACE

In all likelihood, my interest in strategic bombing stems from my dad. He told me countless times of watching the B-29s roll off the runway at Tinian, brought me model kits of famous World War II bombers, and guaranteed that I saw such movies as "Twelve O' Clock High" and "The War Lover." My interest intensified while I was a cadet at the Air Force Academy, and it remained strong when, as a First Lieutenant in 1980, I was assigned to Osan, Air Base, Korea. My boss there was Major John R. Allen, a veteran of three B-52 missions during the December 1972 "Linebacker II" bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Allen's recollections of his flights over Hanoi--remembrances that evoked pride, fear, exhilaration, and, above all, a profound sense of despair--provided the spark that resulted in this dissertation. He could not fathom why air commanders conducted repetitious strikes during the campaign's first three days. He also wondered why the operation suddenly ended instead of continuing until the North Vietnamese surrendered. These questions demanded answers, and I set out to find them by analyzing the entire 11-day effort. I soon discovered that I could not adequately appraise Linebacker II without examining the previous air campaigns against North Vietnam, because their conduct directly influenced the December bombings. Ultimately, I found that Allen's questions underscored the fundamental issue regarding the employment of air power: strategic bombing's ability to achieve national political goals.

Clausewitz's definition of war as "a continuation of political activity by other means" provides the truest perspective for evaluating air power's effectiveness; the supreme test of bombing efficacy is its contribution to a nation's war aims. To date, no study evaluates the entire air war against North Vietnam from a Clausewitzian vantage

point.¹ I have therefore attempted to produce such a work by analyzing America's three air campaigns against the North: Rolling Thunder (2 March 1965--31 October 1968), Linebacker I (10 May--23 October 1972), and Linebacker II (18-29 December 1972). Since the United States' air campaigns in World War II and Korea helped mold the air power convictions of American civilian and military leaders in Vietnam, I have placed the air war against the North in its broadest historical setting by briefly analyzing these previous offensives, as well as the doctrinal tenets that emerged from them.

While realizing that my findings are not "definitive" because my evidence is not inclusive--many American sources on Vietnam remain classified, and American historians do not enjoy access to the source that would most clearly reveal bombing effectiveness, the archives of the North Vietnamese Politburo--I believe that to wait until all evidence is available before evaluating it would be a mistake. Enough information is present to determine many of the reasons why bombing failed as a political tool for Lyndon Johnson, and why it succeeded for Richard Nixon. This is not to imply that Nixon's bombing should serve as a blueprint for applying air power, nor that Johnson's approach to bombing should be avoided. Each man sought distinctive

¹ James Clay Thompson's Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980) uses Rolling Thunder as a model for determining the effects that bureaucratic organizations have on the formulation of state policy. Robert L. Gallucci's Neither Peace nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Viet-Nam (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) examines how "policy momentum" during 1964 and early 1965 led to the bombing of North Vietnam, and how bureaucratic conflicts over Rolling Thunder influenced the air campaign from 1965 to 1967. John Morrocco's two volumes in Boston Publishing Company's The Vietnam Experience series, Thunder from Above (1984) and Rain of Fire (1985), contain narrative histories of Rolling Thunder and Linebackers I and II. The Air War in Indochina (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), written by Cornell University's Air War Study Group and edited by Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, includes a concise overview of Rolling Thunder and an evaluation of its effectiveness. William W. Momyer's Air Power in Three Wars (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1978) contains an operational analysis of Rolling Thunder and both Linebackers, while James R. McCarthy and George B. Allison's Linebacker II: A View from the Rock (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air War College, 1979), provides a detailed narrative of the December 1972 campaign. The official Air Force history of the air war against North Vietnam has yet to be published.

goals and faced unique circumstances in Vietnam, and the combination of aims and conditions directly affected bombing efficacy. What I hope emerges from this work is a realization that conventional air power's effectiveness as a political instrument varies according to a number of factors: among them are the political objectives pursued by both sides as well as how each belligerent chooses to apply military force. Vietnam provides no concrete models for effective bombing; above all else, the conflict epitomizes Clausewitz's notion that war is a fluid process. Yet many of the elements that influenced the air campaigns against North Vietnam could reappear in future American conflicts, and an awareness of these factors could benefit civilian and military leaders wrestling with prickly options of air power employment. As the April 1966 attack on Libya demonstrates, the probability is high that the United States will continue to rely on air power as a political tool.

An understanding of two additional points is essential before beginning the text. First, I have labeled American war aims as either "positive" or "negative" objectives. My use of these terms differs somewhat from that of Clausewitz, who applies them to military aims. He contends that a nation's positive goal is the destruction of enemy forces, while its negative objective is "pure resistance . . . to frustrate the enemy's intentions."² I employ the terms to describe a nation's political objectives, which in turn determine its military goals. In this work, positive objectives are those attainable through the application of military force, while negative objectives are achievable only by limiting the application of military power. For example, President Johnson's positive political goal in Vietnam was an independent, stable, non-Communist South, and he also sought the negative aim of avoiding direct intervention by the Chinese or Soviets. Clausewitz asserts that "a preponderantly negative policy will . . . retard the decision" in war.³ This observation also fits my definition. I

²Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter J. Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 97-99.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

maintain that political controls on air power flow directly from negative objectives, and that the respective emphasis given positive and negative aims can affect air power's political efficacy.

Second, my focus on how well air power complemented American political objectives highlights the Air Force role in Vietnam. This emphasis is in no way an attempt to slight the enormous efforts in the air campaigns by the Navy and Marines. Rather, I am endeavoring to portray how the indelible stamp of Air Force strategic bombing doctrine affected the air war against the North, and how doctrinal convictions established long before Vietnam colored air commanders' perceptions of bombing effectiveness.

* * * * *

Many people have contributed to the preparation of this dissertation. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, former National Security Advisor Walt W. Rostow, and former State Department Director of Vietnam Affairs Paul M. Kattenburg allowed me to interview them. Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara patiently answered my questions concerning Rolling Thunder over the telephone. General John W. Vogt, Jr. (USAF, Retired) spent many hours with me discussing both Linebacker and Rolling Thunder, and Lieutenant General Joseph H. Moore (USAF, Retired) sent me a letter answering my many questions about his role in Rolling Thunder. Major John R. Allen (USAF, Retired) not only provided the interest that grew into a dissertation but also provided me with many hours of recollections during interviews. Other Air Force participants in the air war against North Vietnam who granted me interviews were: Colonel Clyde E. Bodenheimer, Colonel Robert D. Clark, Colonel Charles Ferguson (USAF Reserve), Lieutenant Colonel William Greenhalgh (Retired) and Major George Thompson (Retired). Major Jim Rash, (USAF, Retired) a veteran of three Linebacker II missions, responded to my request for information with a detailed letter. Major Fred

Watts (USMC, Retired) sent me a thorough description of the Marine Corps' raids in the Korean War against hydroelectric power plants. Captain John R. Scoggins, Jr. (USAF) provided me with valuable information on North Vietnam's resupply capability.

Without the assistance of the staffs at the Air Force Historical Research Center and three Presidential Libraries, I could not have accomplished this work. Ms. Judy Endicott, Mr. Pressley Bickerstaff, Mrs. Margaret C. Claiborn, Mrs. Lynn O. Gamma, Dr. James H. Kitchens, Mrs. Nora S. Bledsoe and Mrs. Sarah F. Rawlings, all of the Air Force Historical Research Center at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, spent untold hours fulfilling my requests for obscure documents. At the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Herbert Pankratz and Kathy Struss provided assistance, while at the Harry S Truman Library Erwin Mueller, Niel Johnson, Elizabeth Saffly, Anita Heavener, and especially Dennis Bilger eagerly responded to my many requests for source material. Dr. David C. Humphrey, Shellynne Eickhoff, Linda Hanson, and Nancy Smith guided my research at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and Dr. Humphrey has responded with alacrity to my subsequent requests by mail.

At the Office of Air Force History, Dr. Wayne Thompson, and at the US Army Center for Military History, Colonel John Schligh (USAF, Ret.) answered many questions that I had concerning the air war against North Vietnam.

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The University of Alabama Press kindly permitted me to use material that will appear in my chapter of The Dimensions of Modern Warfare: Vietnam, Central America, and Nuclear Strategy, scheduled for publication in late 1987.

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Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., have furnished assistance throughout my graduate studies. In addition to the specific comments--both verbal and written--that they have provided regarding the dissertation, my time with them in the classroom has immeasurably improved my capacity to reason. Colonel Dennis M. Drew, Director of the Air Power Research Institute at the Air Force's Center for Aerospace Doctrine, Research, and Education (CADRE), and Lieutenant Colonel Price T. Bingham, also at CADRE, have been most helpful in critiquing my chapters, while Dr. Frank Futrell provided detailed comments on chapter one. My dad, the most meticulous proofreader I have seen, thoroughly reviewed the entire text. Without the special attention given by two individuals, however, I could not have completed this project to the best of my ability. Professors David MacIsaac and Peter Maslowski--both of whom have known me for many years and have treated me like a son--offered a multitude of constructive criticisms after reading each chapter. They chided me when I needed it, praised me when they felt I deserved it, and provided me with encouragement when I feared the cause was lost. They are the ideals whom I think of whenever I hear the term "historian."

The support of friends also merits mention. Major Curt Bodke and Captain Steve Petersen, classmates and confidants, reassured me throughout the research and writing. Don Winslow of Lincoln, Nebraska, supported the work when it first began in 1982. I must also name my next-door neighbor, Carolina grad Sherry Gales, who literally saved chapter one when my computer threatened to erase it, and who never once complained of hearing my printer at two o' clock in the morning.

Those who deserve the most credit are the three individuals whom I hold most dear: my parents and my wife. Without the values that Mom and Dad have instilled in me, I cannot imagine myself ever undertaking such an effort; without Donna's continual support, I cannot imagine myself satisfied with the result. During my two and a half years at Carolina, I have become more strongly convinced than ever

that I am blessed with the most wonderful parents God created. Donna, meanwhile, has far exceeded my vision of the perfect wife.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank Coach Dean Smith and the Tar Heel basketball teams of 1984-85, 1985-86 and 1986-87. They did not have to win a national championship to provide ample doses of inspiration and joy to an Air Force captain struggling to meet the demands of academe.

R. M. A. C.
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
30 April 1987

CHAPTER I

FROM UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER TO FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

It is clear . . . that war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means. What remains peculiar to war is simply the peculiar nature of its means. War in general, and the commander in any specific instance, is entitled to require that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means. That, of course, is no small demand; but however much it may affect political aims in a given case, it will never do more than modify them. The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.

Carl von Clausewitz¹

The military forces of the United States can perform their greatest and most economical service in any form of international conflict by providing circumstances in which the United States can exercise a compelling initiative in international affairs.

Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 December 1959²

The achievement of manned flight in 1903 added a new dimension to the "political instrument" of war. Yet by 1918 the idea of "strategic" aerial bombardment--that aimed at a country's war-making potential rather than at its deployed armed forces--remained little more than theory. Following World War I men such as Giulio Douhet, Hugh Trenchard, and William "Billy" Mitchell espoused the belief that bomber aircraft provided the best means to secure political objectives through military force. Bombers, they argued, could destroy not only the capability of an enemy to wage war, but also the enemy's will to fight. In the United States, strategic bombing proponents

¹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter J. Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 87.

²Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 December 1959, p. 3.

stressed these concepts at Maxwell Field's Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), which trained many of the Second World War's air commanders.³ While ACTS officers emphasized air power as a means to demolish an enemy's war-making potential, they did not disregard the belief that bombing could destroy an enemy's national will. They contended that destroying a nation's war-making capability, through attacks on its economic "vital centers," would disrupt its social fabric and lead to a collapse of morale. Observed Lieutenant Haywood Hansell in a 1936 ACTS lecture: "A nation's attacking air force would be at liberty to proceed directly to the ultimate aim in war: overthrow of the enemy will to resist through the destruction of those vital elements upon which modern social life is dependent."⁴ The ACTS viewed transportation, steel, iron ore, and electric power facilities as the elements most essential to an industrial nation's economic well-being, and hence, the most likely objectives for air attack.⁵

To American air theorists during the interwar period, strategic bombing offered the means to accomplish two interrelated objectives. First, by destroying an enemy's capability and will to resist, it could win a war independently of armies and navies. Second, because of its ability to achieve an independent decision, strategic bombing provided a rationale for making the Air Corps a separate service from the Army. The Army's air branch made some strides towards autonomy between the world

³Its graduates included, among others, future generals Carl A. Spaatz, Frank M. Andrews, Ira C. Eaker, Curtis E. LeMay, George E. Stratemeyer, Otto F. Weyland, and Hoyt S. Vandenberg.

⁴See "The Aim in War," in the Haywood S. Hansell Papers, Box 20, USAF Academy Library. Hansell was most influential in the formation of Army Air Forces bombing doctrine, as he was one of four officers who developed AWPB-1, the plan that guided the American air campaign against Germany.

⁵Robert T. Finney, History of the Air Corps Tactical School (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University, 1955), p. 32. See pp. 26-39 for a discussion of ACTS doctrinal development, as well as: Thomas H. Greer, The Development of Air Doctrine in the Army Air Arm 1917-1941 (Maxwell AFB: Air University, 1955), pp. 14-122; Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate, The Army Air Forces in World War II, 7 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948-1958), I: 17-71; I. B. Holley, Jr., Ideas and Weapons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953; reprint ed., Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), pp. 157-174; and Robert F. Futrell, Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: A History of Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907-1964 (Maxwell AFB: Air University, 1971), pp. 69-85.

vars: in 1926, it changed its name from the Air Service to the Air Corps and received special representation on the Army's General Staff; in 1934, it established a General Headquarters (GHQ) Air Force that directed all combat units and stressed strategic bombing as the Air Corps' primary mission; in 1941, it became the Army Air Forces, directed by a commander who served as Deputy Chief of Staff for Air. Boeing's 1935 prototype of a four-engine "heavy" bomber (the X-B-17, which could also serve as a passenger airplane) and perfection of the Norden bombsight in that same year provided the Air Corps with the tools to conduct precision raids against essential elements of an enemy's economy.

Strategic bombing advocates refused to proclaim their perceived ability too loudly, however. They instead echoed Mitchell's earlier pronouncements that bombers offered the best means of protecting the United States against invasion.⁶ Most Army officers viewed the Air Corps as a means of infantry support and had little faith that strategic bombing could independently achieve victory. For them, "tactical" bombing--that designed to assist ground forces on the battlefield--was the Air Corps' primary mission. "Air Forces constitute a highly mobile and powerful element which . . . conducts the operations for carrying out the Army mission," declared the Army's 1935 regulation governing Air Corps combat responsibilities.⁷ By retaining control of the Air Corps, Army commanders felt that they could guarantee that air power remained responsive to their needs. Strategic bombing proponents chafed under the Army's dominion. "I am confident that no general thinks he can control the Navy or no

⁶In 1931, after a battle with the Navy, the Air Corps received control of all land-based aviation involved in coastal defense.

⁷US Army Training Regulation 440-15, "Employment of the Air Forces of the Army," 15 October 1935, quoted in Finney, p. 34.

admiral thinks he can operate an army," commented Air Service Captain Horace Hickam, "but some of them think they can operate an air force."⁸

World War II gave American air leaders a chance to vindicate their faith in strategic air power, as they directed huge armadas against Germany and Japan in pursuit of "unconditional surrender." The perceived contribution of strategic bombing to Allied victory was largely responsible for the creation of the Air Force as a separate service in 1947. Strategic bombing's effect on the war in Korea was less clear-cut. In Korea, Air Force commanders employed air resources supporting limited political objectives that vacillated between the aim of South Korean independence and the elimination of Communism from the Korean peninsula. The differences in both the political objectives and the military conduct of the two wars produced ambiguous conclusions for those who analyzed the effectiveness of strategic bombing. Military chiefs tended to view Korea as an aberration. As a result, the air doctrine developed in the decade after the struggle focused on global conflict and slighted limited war. While civilian analysts saw Korea as a model for future wars, they did little to dissuade Air Force commanders from emphasizing large doses of air power as the cure for all military confrontations. The perceived efficacy of bombing as a political tool in World War II and Korea, combined with Air Force doctrinal developments during the post-Korea decade, significantly affected how the United States employed air power during the Vietnam War.

⁸Quoted in DeWitt S. Copp, A Few Great Captains (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1980), p. xv. For an analysis of the Air Corps' emphasis on strategic bombing to achieve autonomy, see pp. 318-332.

WORLD WAR II

WAR AIMS

President Franklin D. Roosevelt believed that the territorial aggrandizements of both Germany and Japan during the 1930s posed direct threats to the security of the United States, its interests abroad, and the entire Western hemisphere. Pearl Harbor, and Hitler's subsequent declaration of war against the United States, united American public opinion in the belief that total victory over the Axis was an appropriate goal. Roosevelt had long held the conviction that nothing less than complete conquest would erase the threat of future militarism by Germany and Japan, and he felt that the failure to crush the German regime in World War I spawned the stab-in-the-back theory that facilitated Hitler's rise.⁹ The President's announcement, at the conclusion of the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, of "unconditional surrender" as the Allied war aim accomplished a twofold purpose: it revealed to the Axis that the Anglo-Americans would not negotiate a settlement prior to the total defeat of the Axis powers, and it assured the Soviets and Chinese that the Anglo-Americans intended to crush the enemy. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin reaffirmed the unconditional surrender idea in a joint declaration at Yalta.¹⁰

Unconditional surrender was the cornerstone forming America's "positive" political objective during World War II. The objective was "positive" in that its achievement compelled the application of military force; no "negative" objectives

⁹Raymond G. O'Connor, Diplomacy for Victory: FDR and Unconditional Surrender (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1971), p. 5; Bernard Brodie, War and Politics (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), p. 39.

¹⁰O'Connor, pp. 49-50; Robert Dallek, Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Gaddis Smith, American Diplomacy during the Second World War (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1965), p. 55; Herbert Feis, Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, 1967), p. 357.

limited the employment of military power.¹¹ The policy remained the Allied goal throughout America's participation in the war. It committed the Allies not only to military subjugation of the Axis, but also to a restructuring of the political institutions of Germany, Italy, and Japan. In the view of Allied leaders, the political revamping could not occur until the Axis' military machines suffered complete defeat.

Military cooperation between the Soviets and the Anglo-Americans promised the best method of maintaining an alliance whose members had different thoughts regarding postwar German political structure. To assure that the Russians and British survived the German onslaught, Roosevelt committed the United States to a strategy of "Germany first." The American and British Chiefs of Staff confirmed this policy, along with the premise of unconditional surrender, at the Arcadia Conference in January 1942.

One year later, at Casablanca, the Combined Chiefs of Staff announced the start of a "round-the-clock" Anglo-American bomber offensive as an integral part of the total effort to subjugate Germany.

BOMBING OBJECTIVES

Roosevelt's emphasis on aircraft production combined with Air Corps planning to produce a bombing strategy focusing on mass and precision. The President believed that air power offered the chance to employ overwhelming force to obtain unconditional surrender in minimum time, and he placed a high priority on the public's desire to end the war quickly and bring American troops back home. In addition, both Roosevelt and Secretary of War Henry Stimson initially felt bombing would demonstrate the seriousness of the American war effort to Russia and China at a small cost in manpower and monetary expenditures. Air Corps planners, prior to Roosevelt's production increases, had developed an air strategy stressing detailed target

¹¹For a discussion of positive and negative objectives, see Preface, pp. viii-ix.

selection and precision bombing. With the additional aircraft provided by Roosevelt, the foundations of the strategy set the tone for AWPB-1, the air plan completed in August 1941 that guided the American bombing campaign against Germany.¹²

Designed to facilitate--or make unnecessary--the invasion of Europe, AWPB-1 aimed at crippling German war-making capability through attacks on essential industrial complexes. Moreover, by emphasizing strategic, rather than tactical, employment of air power, the air planners sought to demonstrate the bomber's unique ability to strike deep behind the battle line--a mission that could, they believed, lead to air force autonomy. The planners selected 154 targets and divided them into four groups: the German electrical power system, transportation system, oil and petroleum industry, and air defense system.¹³ At the Casablanca Conference, destruction of the capability, and will, of the German nation to resist became the announced goals of the Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO). The Americans, through "precision" daylight attacks, geared their portion of the assault against the German war-making capability while the British designed their nighttime area raids to have maximum effect on the morale of industrial workers. Because of British merchant shipping losses and German air superiority over the continent, the Combined Chiefs changed specific target priorities at Casablanca to make submarine construction yards and the German aircraft

¹²See William Emerson, "Franklin Roosevelt as Commander-in-Chief in World War II," Military Affairs 12 (Winter 1958-1959): 204-207, and David MacIsaac, Strategic Bombing in World War II (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1976), p. 107; R. J. Overy, The Air War 1939-1945 (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), pp. 134-135; David MacIsaac, gen. ed., The United States Strategic Bombing Survey (herein referred to as USSBS), 10 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1976), Vol. 1: pp. x-xi. The acronym "AWPB" resulted from the name of the office that developed the document, the Air War Plans Division of the Army Air Staff. For a thorough look at AWPB-1's evolution, see Haywood Hansell's The Air Plan that Defeated Hitler (Atlanta: Higgins-McArthur/Longino and Porter, 1972), and James C. Gaston, Planning the American Air War: Four Men and Nine Days in 1941 (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1982).

¹³MacIsaac, Strategic Bombing, pp. 12-15; MacIsaac, USSBS, 1: x; DeWitt S. Copp, "The Pioneer Plan for Air War," Air Force, October 1982, pp. 76-77; Barry D. Watts, The Foundations of US Air Doctrine (Maxwell AFB: Air University, 1984), pp. 17-26; Craven and Cate, 1: 131-150, 597-611; Furell, 104-116; Robert L. Gallucci, Neither Peace nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Viet-Nam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 74-5.

industry the two top objectives. In May 1943 the Luftwaffe assumed the number one priority as an "intermediate objective," which, if not defeated, could prevent the CBO from accomplishing the requisite pre-invasion destruction.¹⁴

Not until early March 1944, after the arrival of the P-51 Mustang, did the Allied air forces achieve air superiority over the continent. In that month General Dwight D. Eisenhower took control of the Anglo-American bomber force and directed it against the transportation network of northern France. Oil became the highest priority target on 8 June 1944,¹⁵ but Eisenhower retained control of the bomber fleets until September to prevent the Germans from massing a counterattack against the invasion beachhead. General Carl A. Spaatz, Commander of the US Strategic Air Forces, and Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris, Commander of RAF Bomber Command, began the concerted effort against oil on 23 September, with rail and waterborne transportation systems assuming second priority.

Although oil remained the highest priority target for the duration of the Combined Bomber Offensive, a 31 January 1945 directive assigned second priority to selected cities in eastern Germany "where heavy attack will cause great confusion in civilian evacuation from the east and hamper reinforcements."¹⁶ The Eighth Air Force directed its February raids on Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden against military-related targets such as railroad marshalling yards. Yet the targets selected were in close proximity to residential areas. The German attack at the Ardennes in December 1944

¹⁴MacIsaac, *Strategic Bombing*, p. 15.

¹⁵The receipt of a German message via ULTRA on 13 May 1944, the day following the first large-scale raid by the Eighth Air Force on German oil production centers, influenced Spaatz's decision to make oil the highest priority target. The message noted that the Luftwaffe Operations Staff had ordered a massive transfer of flak batteries from the defenses of both the Eastern Front and aircraft production plants to the emplacements surrounding the refineries attacked. See U. S. Army Air Forces, *ULTRA and the History of the United States Strategic Air Force in Europe vs. the German Air Force*, ed. Paul L. Kesaris (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1980), p. 89.

¹⁶Craven and Cate, 3:725.

shocked the Allied High Command and demonstrated that Germany still possessed the capability and will to resist. To facilitate the goal of unconditional surrender, American air commanders ordered raids that they believed would directly affect civilian morale. Two days before the 3 February 1945 attack on Berlin, Lieutenant General James H. Doolittle, the Eighth Air Force Commander, wired Spaatz asking

Is Berlin still open to air attack? Do you want priority oil targets hit in preference to Berlin if they definitely become visual? Do you want center of City in Berlin hit or definitely military targets, such as Spandau, on the Western outskirts?¹⁷

Spaatz's reply was terse. He told Doolittle to "hit oil if visual assured; otherwise, Berlin--center of City."¹⁸ Cloud cover over the primary target forced Doolittle's aircrews to bomb their secondary objective: government buildings in the heart of downtown Berlin. The attack killed 25,000 people. The Anglo-American assault ten days later against Dresden resulted in the deaths of at least 35,000 civilians.¹⁹ Despite Lieutenant General Ira Eaker's 1943 declaration, "We must never allow the record of this war to convict us of throwing the strategic bomber at the man in the street,"²⁰ by 1945 the American raids on Germany resembled the RAF's area attacks in their consequences.

In the Pacific, the onslaught of Major General Curtis E. LeMay's B-29s shattered Eaker's expectations. As a lieutenant in the late 1930s, LeMay served on the staff of the GHQ Air Force and flew as a B-17 navigator, and in World War II's European theater, he commanded the 305th Bomb Group and led the grueling mission against Regensburg. Before his arrival in the Pacific, the Twentieth Air Force bombed Japan ineffectively from Chinese bases. The unit launched its first raid from the Marianas on

¹⁷Message, Doolittle to Spaatz, 1 February 1945, in Carl A. Spaatz Papers, box 23, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

¹⁸*Ibid.* At the bottom of Doolittle's message, Spaatz typed: "Replied by telephone conversation and told Doolittle to hit oil if visual assured; otherwise, Berlin--center of City. C. S."

¹⁹For an examination of the Dresden attacks, see my "Culmination Dresden: 1945" *Aerospace Historian* 26 (Fall 1979): 134-47.

²⁰Ira C. Eaker and Arthur G. B. Metcalf, "Conversations with Albert Speer," *Air Force*, April 1977, p. 57.

24 November 1944. Until 9 March 1945, the primary objective of the Marianas-based XXI Bomber Command was Japanese aircraft production and repair facilities. The B-29s flew raids against specific targets in much the same manner as did B-17s and B-24s in Europe. These attacks, designed to support the planned invasion of Japan, produced little damage because of the dispersal of the Japanese aircraft industry and the difficulty of bombing from very high altitudes. As a result, LeMay searched for a new method by which to conduct strategic bombing.

While the Japanese had dispersed many of their large industries, they relied heavily on plants employing fewer than 250 workers for subcontracted parts and equipment. Scattered throughout the residential sections of many Japanese cities, the small plants accounted for 50 percent of Tokyo's industrial output.²¹ Japanese cities also contained a large number of highly inflammable wooden structures, and much of the American public sought maximum retribution for Pearl Harbor.²² These combined factors led LeMay to initiate the firebombing of Japan.

LeMay's incendiary assault and the atomic raids that followed revealed a new emphasis in the strategic campaign against Japan--the direct destruction of the enemy's will to resist. American air leaders believed that the loss of war-making capability would cause a corresponding loss of national morale, as a nation's economic collapse would trigger social chaos. With Japanese industry impervious to precision raids, LeMay chose to target will directly. His low-level attacks against industry clumped in residential districts produced tremendous civilian losses and led him to believe that the fire assault would ultimately compel a Japanese surrender. President Harry S Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb revealed a similar conviction. Truman believed that the bomb's effects would be no worse than the results of LeMay's

²¹MacIsaac, USSBS, 4: Summary Report (Pacific War), 18.

²²John W. Dower, War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), pp. 38-41.

fire raids and that a Japanese capitulation without invasion would save an immense number of American lives.²³

CONTROLS ON BOMBING

Both Roosevelt and Truman firmly directed grand strategy, yet the absence of negative political objectives allowed them to give the Joint Chiefs an essentially free rein in conducting combat operations such as strategic bombing. Roosevelt frequently overruled the Joint Chiefs on strategic matters. General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces, disagreed with the President's 1942 decisions to invade North Africa and to give General Douglas MacArthur additional materiel support. The air chief perceived that both policies detracted from the aim of defeating Germany first by transferring scarce bomber resources away from the Eighth Air Force's buildup in England. Yet Arnold noted "that once the President of the United States agreed on the general principles [of an operation], he relied upon his Chiefs of Staff to carry them out--to make plans for the consummation of these general ideas." Arnold delegated broad authority to his subordinates LeMay and Spaatz. While Arnold assisted LeMay in some target selection, Spaatz "operated with free hands." The bulk of command restraints on the Strategic Air Forces commander stemmed from Eisenhower.²⁴

Despite their freedom from political controls, Army Air Forces commanders faced numerous operational restrictions. In addition to the diversion of bombers and crew members to other theaters, the arrival of untrained airmen hampered the build

²³Brodie, p. 55. In contrast to this "accepted" view, Rufus E. Miles, Jr. makes a strong case that Roosevelt's 1942 decision to develop the atomic bomb "carried with it the implicit intent to use it as soon as it became available if it would shorten the war. There was no need to take into account other considerations." The premise that Hiroshima and Nagasaki averted hundreds of thousands of American deaths is, Miles contends, false. See "Hiroshima," *International Security* 10 (Fall 1985): 139-40.

²⁴H. H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), pp. 278, 333, 496; Craven and Cate, 5: 624.

up of the Eighth Air Force.²⁵ The absence of a long-range fighter plagued the American campaign against Germany throughout 1943, and following the disastrous October mission to Schweinfurt General Eaker prohibited further unescorted raids against the Reich. Unfavorable weather also restricted the air campaigns in both Europe and the Pacific. To maintain "round-the-clock" pressure on Germany, the Army Air Forces commanders resorted to blind bombing techniques that provided results similar to those achieved by the British area offensive. In the Pacific, Japan remained immune to strategic air attack until the Americans could secure bases within 1500 miles of the home islands; prior to the conquest of the Marianas, B-29s could not bomb Tokyo.

BOMBING RESULTS

Not until the latter stages of the war against both Germany and Japan did the brunt of the Allied strategic bombing campaigns occur. The Anglo-American Bomber Commands dropped 1,234,767 tons of bombs--over 60 percent of the total falling on Axis Europe during the entire war--between July 1944 and April 1945. The Combined Bomber Offensive killed 305,000 German civilians, wounded 780,000, rendered 1,865,000 homeless, forced evacuation of 4,885,000, and deprived 20,000,000 of public utilities. By the third quarter of 1944, the campaign had tied down an estimated 4,500,000 workers, nearly 20 percent of the non-agricultural labor force, in air raid-related activities. Bombing had destroyed half the supply of all petroleum products by December 1944, while reserves of aviation gasoline had fallen by 90 percent of their level when the oil campaign began in May. The attack on transportation that began in September 1944 had, in five months, lessened the volume of railroad car loadings by 75 percent.²⁶

²⁵Melden E. Smith, Jr., "The Strategic Bombing Debate: The Second World War and Vietnam," Journal of Contemporary History 12 (1977): 180.

²⁶MacIsaac, USSBS, 1: The Effects of Strategic Bombing on German Morale, 7: 1: Overall Report (Europe), 37.

B-29s dropped 147,000 tons of bombs on Japan during the whole of the Pacific War, but only 7,180 tons fell prior to the first fire raid on 9 March 1945. Twentieth Air Force conducted fire assaults against 66 Japanese cities, killing 330,000 civilians and rendering 8,500,000 homeless. Production hours lost because of bombing rose from 20 percent in 1944 to over 40 percent in July 1945, by which time industrial production had declined to 35 percent of the Japanese wartime peak.²⁷

Destruction of the enemy's war-making capability marked only one of the goals of the Allied bombing offensives; destruction of the enemy's will was an aim of equal importance. Compiled by a team primarily of civilian researchers at the end of World War II, The United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) concluded that the bombing of Germany "did not stiffen [German] morale."²⁸ Yet it also revealed that the German populace could withstand the Allied air onslaught:

The mental reaction of the German people to air attack is significant. Under ruthless control they showed surprising resistance to the terror and hardships of repeated air attack, to the destruction of their homes and belongings, and to the conditions under which they were reduced to live. Their morale, their beliefs in ultimate victory or satisfactory compromise, and their confidence in their leaders declined, but they continued to work efficiently as long as the physical means of production remained. The power of a police state over its people cannot be underestimated.²⁹

Against the Japanese, LeMay's fire raids produced an increasing disenchantment with the war. When the incendiary attacks began in March 1945, 19 percent of the Japanese civil populace believed that Japan could not achieve victory; just prior to the surrender in August the total had increased to 68 percent, of which over one-half of the individuals interviewed credited air attacks, other than the atomic

²⁷Ibid., 7: Summary Report (Pacific War), 16, 18-19; Craven and Cate, 5: 734-5; Overy, p. 125.

²⁸MacIsaac, USSBS, 4: The Effects of Strategic Bombing on German Morale, 1.

²⁹Ibid., 1: Overall Report (Europe), 108.

raids, as the principal reason for their beliefs.³⁰ By the time of Hiroshima, some members of the Japanese Supreme War Council already favored peace. The atomic attacks induced the Emperor to intervene in the usual functioning of the Council to secure an armistice. Thus, concluded the Survey, the atomic bombs "did foreshorten the war and expedite the peace."³¹

The Survey did not claim that strategic bombing achieved victory in either the European or Pacific theaters; however, it surmised that had Allied armies not overrun Germany in 1945, bombing would have halted the nation's armament production by May, resulting in the collapse of German resistance a few months thereafter.³² Likewise, the Survey asserted that "certainly prior to 31 December 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no land invasion had been planned or contemplated."³³ The Survey further claimed that the application of Allied air power in Europe was "decisive," and implied the same in its summation of the Pacific War. Still, in both cases, the study viewed the contribution of strategic bombing as complementing the efforts of ground and naval forces.

In the larger sense, the bombing campaigns complemented the primary goal of unconditional surrender, accomplishing this by a preponderance of effort rather than through surgical precision. The Army Air Forces hammered both Germany and Japan, but use of the bludgeon rather than the rapier meshed with the purpose of obliterating the political, as well as military, foundations of the Axis nations. Bombing also supported the aim of achieving victory in the shortest time, facilitating the invasion of France and obviating the invasion of Japan. In hastening

³⁰Ibid., 7: Summary Report (Pacific War), 21. The Survey obtained these figures by interviewing a cross-section of the Japanese civilian populace, including both urban and rural sectors and various economic and social classes.

³¹Ibid., Japan's Struggle to End the War, 12.

³²Ibid., 1: Overall Report (Europe), 38.

³³Ibid., 7: Summary Report (Pacific War), 26.

unconditional surrender, the air offensives prevented untold Allied casualties, especially regarding the projected assault on Japan, although the air campaigns themselves were not cheap in either money or men. The costs of aircraft production and aircrew training absorbed a significant chunk of the War Department's budget, and nearly 80,000 American airmen died in the skies over Europe.³⁴

While the Combined Bomber Offensive ultimately wreaked havoc on Germany's war-making capacity, significant results did not appear until the final seven months of the campaign, when the bulk of the tonnage dropped fell on the Reich. Hitler had geared the German economy for a short war, and only after Stalingrad did German factories begin the transition to maximum output. This production lag hindered the effectiveness of the CBO during 1943. In the Pacific, the American submarine fleet's isolation of the Japanese home islands from needed raw materials enhanced the effectiveness of LeMay's incendiary onslaught and further demonstrated to the Japanese populace the hopeless nature of the war. Yet, despite the massive destruction wrought by the fire raids, only after Hiroshima did the Emperor assert his authority to seek an armistice.

To Army Air Forces commanders, the strategic bombing offensives vindicated their belief that bombing would play a vital role in securing victory. General Spaatz, the US Air Force's first Chief of Staff, typified the thoughts of most American air leaders at the end of World War II when he commented: "We might have won the war in Europe without it [strategic bombing], but I very much doubt it."³⁵ The general pointed to the achievement of air superiority and a policy of continuous pressure as the keys to success. LeMay spoke for many air commanders in the Pacific when he offered his opinion on the effectiveness of the atomic bomb: "I think it was

³⁴Ronald H. Bailey, The Air War in Europe (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1979), p. 191.

³⁵USAF Oral History Interview of General Carl A. Spaatz by Mr. Arthur Goldberg, 19 May 1963, on file at the Air Force Historical Research Center (hereinafter referred to as AFHRC), Maxwell AFB, AL, file number K239.0512-755, p. 13.

anticlimactic in that the verdict was already rendered."³⁶ Army generals, less certain of strategic bombing's impact, thought that tactical air power missions such as close support and battlefield interdiction made more significant contributions to victory than did the long-range attacks. Nevertheless, air chiefs viewed strategic bombing as successful, and hence a justification for Air Force autonomy.

While believing that conventional bombing had contributed greatly to Allied victory, air leaders viewed the atomic bomb as the supreme weapon to complement the ACTS concept of strategic air power. The bomb's destructive force made real the possibility that a strategic assault at the beginning of a conflict could decide the struggle before the mobilization of armies or navies. The bomb provided further rationale for service autonomy, as the Army Air Forces possessed the weapon's sole means of delivery. The Air Force achieved independent status in 1947, and the service's doctrine remained structured around ACTS tenets. Those principles guided air strategists as they prepared for conflict with the Soviet Union, which emerged as America's primary threat in the postwar era. Air planners continued to stress attacks on "essential" elements of an enemy's economy, although they realized that atomic raids would destroy far more than the intended industrial targets. Still, they refused to target cities as such and emphasized the effects of destroying an enemy's war-making capability. Remarkd Colonel Turner C. Rodgers, a member of the Air Staff's Research and Development branch:

Success in a war of the future will depend more than ever before on the industrial capacity and efficiency of the protagonists, therefore destruction of the enemy's industrial capacity will contribute most toward reduction of his ability to wage war. This fact coupled with the

³⁶Curtis E. LeMay with MacKinlay Kantor, Mission with LeMay (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), p. 388.

character of the atomic explosion leads to the conclusion that the most profitable target for the atomic bomb will be large industrial centers.³⁷

Despite the air planners' willingness to use atomic weapons, both the number of atomic bombs and of B-29s capable of delivering them limited the United States' ability to launch an atomic assault prior to 1950. America's atomic stockpile consisted of 2 bombs in 1945, 9 in 1946, 13 in 1947, 50 in 1948, and 250 in 1949.³⁸ In late 1946, only 16 of 46 B-29s modified for atomic bombs during World War II were available for combat missions, and none of the B-29s deployed to England during the Berlin blockade were capable of carrying atomic weapons.³⁹ As a result of this meager atomic capability, most Air Force war plans developed prior to the Korean War stressed conventional operations against Soviet industrial targets.⁴⁰

As an analysis of conventional bombing, the USSBS offered insight for those grappling with the problems of a projected air campaign. Perhaps the Survey's most significant determination for the future application of American air power appeared in the summation concerning the effectiveness of strategic bombing against the Japanese:

The experience of the Pacific War supports the findings of the Survey in Europe that heavy, sustained and accurate attack against

³⁷Report, "Strategic Implications," 3 February 1947, quoted in John T. Greenwood, "The Emergence of the Postwar Strategic Air Force, 1945-1953," in Alfred F. Hurley and Robert C. Ehrhart, eds., Air Power and Warfare: Proceedings of the Eighth Military History Symposium at the US Air Force Academy (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1979), p. 223. For an analysis of Air Force organizational and doctrinal developments during the postwar era, see Perry McCoy Smith, The Air Force Plans for Peace 1943-1945 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970); Herman S. Wolk, Planning and Organizing the Postwar Air Force (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1984), and Futrell, pp. 193-262.

³⁸Robert F. Futrell, "The Influence of the Air Power Concept on Air Force Planning, 1945-1962," in Harry R. Borowski, ed., Military Planning in the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the Eleventh Military History Symposium at the US Air Force Academy (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1986), p. 257.

³⁹Greenwood, pp. 228, 237.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 228-29. For a thorough examination of the Air Force's deficiencies as an atomic attack force during the early postwar period, see Harry R. Borowski, A Hollow Threat: Strategic Air Power and Containment before Korea (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

carefully selected targets is required to produce decisive results when attacking an enemy's sustaining resources. It further supports the findings in Germany that no nation can long survive the free exploitation of air weapons over its homeland. For the future it is important to grasp the fact that enemy planes enjoying control of the sky over one's head can be as disastrous to one's country as its occupation by physical invasion.⁴¹

KOREA

WAR AIMS

Despite Secretary of State Dean Acheson's announcement in January 1950 excluding Korea from the United States "defensive perimeter" in the Far East, President Truman viewed the North Korean assault in June as a threat to American national interests and committed military force to preserve the Southern government. The forceful restoration of an independent, non-Communist South Korea to its pre-invasion territorial status was the United States' positive political objective during the initial four months of the Korean war. The President considered the North Korean aggression part of a larger Russian plan for world domination, and he made support for South Korea "a symbol of the strength and determination of the West."⁴² Yet Truman committed American forces only to repel the North Korean attack, for while he acknowledged that "the Reds were probing for weaknesses in our armor," he also concluded that "we had to meet their thrust without getting embroiled in a world-wide war."⁴³

The President's desire to avoid a world war was the principal negative objective limiting the employment of American military power. To prevent such a catastrophe, Truman restricted the conflict to the Korean peninsula and strove to

⁴¹Maclean, USSBS, 7: Summary Report (Pacific War), 28.

⁴²Harry S Truman, Memoirs, vol. 2: Years of Trial and Hope (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1956), p. 339.

⁴³Ibid., p. 337.

forestall Soviet or Chinese intervention. Other negative objectives also restrained the American military involvement. The President and his advisors contended that the North Korean attack was a feint to test the willingness of the United States to confront Communist aggression. They believed that the main Communist assault would come in Europe. The goal of preserving a non-Communist Western Europe significantly lessened the number of American troops sent to Korea.⁴⁴ In addition, Truman and his counselors placed a premium on maintaining the integrity of the United Nations' military effort. The British in particular feared that too much force in Korea could lead to Soviet reprisals against Europe, and their call for caution further restricted the intensity of American combat participation. "Great Britain is our greatest ally," Acheson remarked. "We have to go just like pigeons--when one turns, the others do it too. We have to fly wing to wing."⁴⁵

Following the success of the Inchon invasion, Truman revamped America's positive political objective. On 27 September 1950 the President approved NSC 81/1, which allowed General MacArthur "to conduct military operations north of the 38th parallel to destroy North Korean forces."⁴⁶ The United Nations supported Truman's action. On 7 October the General Assembly recommended that "all appropriate steps be taken to ensure conditions of stability throughout Korea," and called for the creation of a "unified, independent, and democratic government in the Sovereign State of

⁴⁴The Army mobilized 2,834,000 men and 20 divisions during the war. Eight Army divisions and one Marine division served in Korea; the remainder served as a reserve pool and guarded against the expected Soviet thrust in Europe. See Russell F. Weigley, History of the United States Army (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1967), p. 508.

⁴⁵Interview of Dean Acheson by Messrs. Hillman, Noyes, and Heller, 18 February 1955, Kansas City, MO, in Post-Presidential Files--"Memoirs" File, Harry S Truman Library, Box 1.

⁴⁶Memorandum from Secretary of Defense George Marshall to President Truman, 27 September 1950, in Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: 1950 (herein cited as FR), Vol. 7: Korea (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 792-793.

Korea."⁴⁷ The positive goal of unifying Korea by military force was contingent upon achieving the unchanged negative objectives. Once the Chinese intervened in November, Truman again modified the positive goal.

For the duration of Truman's presidency, the United States pursued the positive objective of an independent, non-Communist South Korea, with a northern boundary suitable for defense and not substantially below the 38th parallel.⁴⁸ After securing an acceptable position near the parallel in June 1951, the UN Command entered into negotiations to achieve a military settlement based upon the battlefield status quo. The President then added an additional positive goal: a settlement without the forced repatriation of prisoners of war.⁴⁹ Negative objectives remained the same, and the Chinese involvement heightened fears among Truman and his advisors that the Russians might intervene as a result of the Sino-Soviet Defense Pact. Although he desired a rapid settlement, the President was unwilling to sacrifice military gains during the negotiations or use the talks to resolve Korean political issues. Having committed the nation's prestige to the defense of South Korea, he demanded an "honorable" accord to achieve American political goals.⁵⁰

Truman's successor also insisted upon an "honorable" agreement, but Dwight Eisenhower did not seek identical political objectives. While no difference existed between the final positive aims desired by Truman and the positive goals sought by Eisenhower, negative objectives varied greatly. In essence, Eisenhower had no objectives that limited his willingness to apply military power. The President did not desire a world war or Soviet intervention in Korea; however, he was willing to risk

⁴⁷UN Resolution 376, 7 October 1950, *Ibid.*, p. 904.

⁴⁸Truman, pp. 455-56.

⁴⁹Interview of Dean Rusk by the author, Athens, Georgia, 15 July 1985.

⁵⁰Truman wrote regarding the May 1952 proposal at Panmunjom to repatriate only those prisoners who desired the exchange: "I had made it very clear that I would not agree to any trade of prisoners that might result in forcibly returning non-Communists to Communist control. To have agreed would have been not only inhumane and tragic but dishonorable as well." See Truman, p. 462.

both to secure America's positive goals. In the spring of 1953 Eisenhower decided that he would have to launch a massive attack against Manchuria to compel the Communists to "accede to an armistice in a reasonable time. . . . To keep the attack from becoming overly costly," he observed, "it was clear that we would have to use atomic weapons."⁵¹ In late May Secretary of State John Foster Dulles communicated this message to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for relay to China. Eisenhower also sent this message to Peking through Chinese officials at Panmunjom.⁵²

The general-turned-President had no misgivings about the civilian casualties that would result from an atomic offensive. As de facto chief of the Anglo-American bomber force following the Normandy invasion, Eisenhower had approved Operation Thunderclap, a plan to terror bomb a war-weary German civilian populace into demanding surrender from the Nazi leadership. "Since conditions stated [for the attack] are that military defeat is certain and obvious," he penciled in August 1944, "I agree the project would be a good one. (We would no longer require bombing on strictly military targets.)"⁵³ President Eisenhower realized that a nuclear Thunderclap in Manchuria "would have created strong disrupting feelings between ourselves and our allies." Still, he thought that if the offensive was successful "the rifts so caused could . . . time, be repaired."⁵⁴ The President felt that the Chinese could do little in

⁵¹Dwight D. Eisenhower, The White House Years, vol. 1: Mandate for Change (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1963), pp. 179-180. The President stated in a 6 May meeting with the National Security Council that "we have got to consider the atomic bomb as simply another weapon in our arsenal." See FR, 1952-54, Vol. 15: Korea, pt. 1, p. 977.

⁵²Edward C. Keefer, "President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the End of the Korean War," Diplomatic History 10 (Summer 1986): 280. In 1965, Eisenhower told Army General Andrew Goodpaster that "he had passed the word secretly to the Chinese at the time of Korea that if they failed to stop the war they were liable to direct attack by us, including nuclear weapon attack." See "Meeting with General Eisenhower, 12 May 1965," Memorandum from Goodpaster to President Johnson, National Security Files, Name File: President Eisenhower, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, Box 3.

⁵³"Air Attack on German Civilian Morale," 7 August 1944, White House Central Files, Confidential Files--Subject Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas, Folder: "Operation Alert (1)," Box 47.

⁵⁴Eisenhower, p. 180.

response to an atomic attack. He also believed that Stalin's death in March 1953 and the confused state of Russian leadership minimized the chances of Soviet retaliation. "The men in the Kremlin were still in the turmoil of the succession period," he noted. "For the moment, possibly, they were more anxious about individual survival and position than about Soviet long-term policy and foreign relations."⁵⁵

BOMBING OBJECTIVES

Just as American political objectives vacillated during the war, the results sought by strategic bombing to support those objectives changed as well. Until MacArthur's success at Inchon, the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) attempted to stymie the advance of the North Korean Army. Air commanders employed bombing as a tool to wreck North Korean political and military institutions during the United Nations' effort to unify the peninsula. After the Chinese involvement, the FEAF again attempted to stem the southern movement of Communist forces. With the beginning of negotiations in June 1951 and the stabilization of a front line, the FEAF became the UN's primary force to use against the Communists. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Omar Bradley noted in November 1952 that air power "constitutes the most potent means, at present available to the United Nations Command, of maintaining the degree of military pressure which might impel the communists to agree, finally, to acceptable armistice terms."⁵⁶

The leaders of the newly-formed US Air Force relied on their training, combat experience, and the dictates of the Commander-in-Chief, United Nations Command (CINCUNC) to determine specific mission objectives. World War II had demonstrated the need to obtain air superiority, and the FEAF quickly destroyed the North Korean Air Force. Until June 1952, the FEAF's mission assignments "revealed the

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 145.

⁵⁶USAF Historical Study No. 127: The United States Air Force Operations in the Korean Conflict 1 July 1952-27 July 1953 (1 July 1956), AFHRC, file number 101-127, p. 9.

opinion that UNC [United Nations Command] ground forces were decisive."⁵⁷ The FEAF Commanders, Lieutenant General George E. Stratemeyer until June 1951, and General O. P. Weyland for the remainder of the war, reported directly to the CINCUNC. CINCUNC MacArthur depended on the FEAF primarily for interdiction and close air support of ground forces, the Air Force's principal missions (along with maintaining air superiority) during the war's first year. The FEAF also attacked the few industrial complexes in North Korea with B-29s, and by 3 October 1950 North Korean industry "was paralyzed."⁵⁸ MacArthur believed that the threat of bombing would keep the Chinese out of the war. Should they decide to intervene, he remarked, "air power would destroy them."⁵⁹ After the Chinese assault, he gave Stratemeyer authority to "destroy" the North Korean cities of Pyongyang, Wonsao, Hamhung, and Hungnam.⁶⁰ Stratemeyer singled-out the North Korean capital for attack, and B-29s bombed Pyongyang twice in the first week of January 1951. For the duration of MacArthur's tenure as CINCUNC, however, the FEAF devoted its primary efforts to interdiction and the close air support.

Close air support and interdiction dominated FEAF missions during the command of MacArthur's successor, General Matthew Ridgway. In May 1951, the FEAF began the first of two operations known as "Strangle." Culminating shortly after the start of truce negotiations, Strangle I aimed at bringing Communist highway traffic to a standstill in the area between the 39th parallel and the front lines. UN commanders' conviction that the Communists planned to use the negotiations as a respite to prepare

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 4.

⁵⁸"Statement to the Press by Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer, 3 October 1950," Frank E. Lowe File, Harry S Truman Library, Independence, MO, Box 247.

⁵⁹USAF Oral History Interview of Thomas K. Finletter by Colonel Marvin Stanley, February 1967, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-760, p. 27. Finletter was Secretary of the Air Force during the Truman era of the Korean War. In his interview with Stanley, he emphasized that MacArthur's statement had appeared in a telegram to Washington following Inchon.

⁶⁰George E. Stratemeyer Diary, entries for 23 and 31 December 1950, AFHRC, file number 168.7018-16, Vol. 3.

for an offensive led to the launching of Strangle II against the North Korean rail system on 18 August 1951.⁶¹ The FEAF geared the campaign "to produce a slow strangulation not necessarily of the enemy Army as such, but rather on his power to take the offensive."⁶² By depriving the Communists of an offensive capability, Strangle II sought to convince them that further fighting was fruitless, and that they should therefore conclude a settlement.

Continued Communist intransigence at the peace talks led the FEAF staff to reappraise the interdiction strategy. In April 1952 Colonel Richard L. Randolph and Lieutenant Colonel Ben I. Mayo produced a study calling for an "air pressure" campaign aimed, like Strangle II, at compelling the Communists to agree to an armistice. Although supported by Weyland, the campaign was opposed by Ridgway, and not until General Mark Clark replaced Ridgway as CINUNC in May 1952 did Weyland receive authority to initiate the policy. Rather than referring to the air pressure strategy as a radical shift from the previous interdiction efforts, air commanders termed the new operation a "shift in emphasis" so as "not to arouse further Army desire for increased close support."⁶³ Aircraft, serviceable airfields, and electric power facilities became the priority targets of the FEAF. The first two objectives revealed the continued emphasis on maintaining air superiority, while the latter revealed the thrust of the new campaign--to inflict maximum possible damage on military-related facilities perceived as essential to the civilian populace's well-being. Brigadier General Jacob Smart, Weyland's deputy for operations, issued the following statement regarding the purpose of the air pressure strategy:

⁶¹USAF Study No. 127, p. 5.

⁶²Hoyt S. Vandenberg, "Air Power in the Korean War," in The Impact of Air Power, ed. Eugene M. Emme (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1959), p. 403. Otto P. Weyland's "The Air Campaign in Korea," also in the Emme volume, concurs with this explanation of Strangle II's purpose. See p. 395.

⁶³Headquarters FEAF, FEAF Operations Policy Korea Mid-1952: An Addendum to the FEAF Histories for that Year (March 1953), AFHRC, file number K720.01, p. 4.

Whenever possible, attacks will be scheduled against targets of military significance so situated that their destruction will have a deleterious effect upon the morale of the civilian population actively engaged in the logistic support of enemy forces.⁶⁴

While both the interdiction and air pressure strategies had the ultimate goal of forcing the Communists to conclude negotiations on terms acceptable to the United Nations, the two strategies sought to achieve this by different designs. Interdiction struck directly at the enemy's capability to continue fighting and indirectly at his will. Air pressure attacked both objectives directly. Like LeMay's World War II fire raids, the air pressure strategy in Korea stemmed from a realization that bombing aimed specifically at the enemy's war-making capability would not yield the desired results. During the last week of June 1952, FEAF and naval aircraft attacked North Korea's hydroelectric plants for the first time. On 11 July, over 1200 UNC aircraft struck military targets in Pyongyang, which had not been bombed for almost a year.⁶⁵ Despite the destruction caused by these raids, the Communist negotiators at Panmunjom refused to compromise on the issue of prisoner release.

The air pressure campaign continued into the Eisenhower presidency as air leaders searched for a way to inflict unacceptable damage on the Communist forces. In late March 1953, the FEAF's target intelligence chief proposed a series of raids against the North Korean irrigation dam system to inundate and destroy the major portion of the country's rice crop. He argued that successful attacks on the dams "would cause a serious food shortage in North Korea which could seriously hamper the overall war effort in North Korea and possibly result in an economic slump of serious proportions accompanied by a lowering of morale and possibly will to fight."⁶⁶ Weyland was

⁶⁴Quoted in Robert F. Futrell, The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953 (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1961), p. 481.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 482.

⁶⁶"Annex to Minutes of the FEAF Formal Target Committee Meeting, 24 March 1953," FEAF Formal Target Committee Minutes, 30 December 1952-24 March 1953, AFHRC, file number K720.151A.

skeptical of both the "feasibility and desirability" of destroying the dams, and he refused to approve a systematic campaign against them.⁶⁷ Clark, however, believed that a massive attack against the dams would persuade the Communists to conclude an agreement. If directed to recess the armistice talks indefinitely because of Communist intransigence, Clark notified the Joint Chiefs on 14 May that he would attack the 20 dams irrigating the rice fields in northwest Korea. The breaching of these dams would, the general noted, "inundate about 422,000 acres of land, causing damage or destruction of an estimated one quarter million tons of rice, thereby curtailing the enemy's ability to live off the land and aggravating a reported Chinese rice shortage and logistic problem."⁶⁸

The day before Clark's message, FEAF F-84s bombed the Toksan dam 20 miles north of Pyongyang. Weyland reluctantly approved this raid, and the FEAF Formal Target Committee had suggested on 12 May that "some mode of deception be utilized so that the enemy will not interpret the attack on the dam as being directed toward a program of subsequent destruction of their rice crops."⁶⁹ As a result, the FEAF planners also targeted a rail bridge below the dam to give the impression that the attackers sought to destroy the rail line. The raid washed out five bridges and six miles of railroad, in addition to flooding 27 miles of river valley. "Somewhat to my surprise, [it] flooded . . . a hell of a lot of North Korea," Weyland later commented.⁷⁰ The success of the strike caused the FEAF Commander to order attacks against two additional dams so situated that their destruction would wash out the remaining rail line leading into

⁶⁷"Minutes of the FEAF Formal Target Committee Meeting, 7 April 1953," FEAF Formal Target Committee Minutes, 4 November 1952-7 April 1953, AFHRC, file number K720.151A.

⁶⁸Message, Clark to JCS, 14 May 1953, FR, 1952-54, Vol. 15: Korea, pt. 1, p. 1022.

⁶⁹"Minutes of the FEAF Formal Target Committee Meeting, 12 May 1953," FEAF Formal Target Committee Minutes, 12 May 1953, AFHRC, file number K720.151A.

⁷⁰USAF Oral History Interview of General O.P. Weyland by Dr. James Hasdorff and Brigadier General Noel Parrish, San Antonio, Texas, 19 November 1974, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-813, p. 114.

Pyongyang. F-84s attacked the Chasan dam on 15 and 16 May, and on 22 and 29 May B-29s bombed the Kuvonga dam. The raids on Chasan breached their objective and caused extensive flooding, but attacks on Kuvonga failed to destroy the dam because the Communists lowered the reservoir's water level.

Emphasizing that he had "not authorized a program of flooding the North Korean rice crop," Weyland approved additional attacks on dams "as interdiction targets."⁷¹ Between 13 and 18 June, FEAf and Marine aircraft struck the Kusong and Toksang dams, located northwest of the Communist communication center of Sinanju, four times each. The raids severely weakened the two structures and compelled the Communists to drain both reservoirs. The FEAf Commander stopped the attacks on 20 June in favor of raids against airfields. Yet he was prepared to resume the dam assaults. Brigadier General Don Z. Zimmerman, the FEAf's Deputy Commander for Intelligence, wrote on 8 July to the Air Force Chief of Intelligence in Washington that other dams "have been chosen and targeted for the purpose of inundating the rail system." Zimmerman noted that Weyland had decided "to hold in abeyance an overall attack plan against North Korean dams pending the outcome of the present armistice negotiations."⁷² The truce signed 19 days later in Panmunjom eliminated the need for further strikes.

CONTROLS ON BOMBING

Despite the shift in target priorities that characterized the war's last year, political controls stemming from negative objectives limited the air effort throughout the conflict. Interdiction and armed reconnaissance totaled 47.7 percent of all combat

⁷¹"Minutes of the FEAf Formal Target Committee Meeting, 26 May 1953," FEAf Formal Target Committee Minutes, 26 May 1953, AFHRC, file number K720.151A.

⁷²"Destruction of North Korean Irrigation Dams," Letter from Brigadier General Don Z. Zimmerman to the Director of Intelligence/HQ USAF, 8 July 1953, in FEAf Command Report, June 1953, Vol. IIA, AFHRC, file number K720.02.

sorties,⁷³ not only because the FEAF attempted to halt two Communist invasions, but also because it could not strike the source of Communist war-making capability. China was a sanctuary for troops, supplies, and airfields, and the north side of the Yalu bridges could not be bombed. Although the National Security Council removed restraints on flights near the Manchurian border once the air pressure campaign began, restrictions on air operations within 12 miles of Soviet territory remained.⁷⁴ These controls continued during the Eisenhower presidency but would have disappeared once the former general decided to launch his atomic offensive. Truman's negative objectives, along with a limited supply of nuclear weapons, prevented him from employing atomic devices in the Far East. Alarmed by the President's December 1950 declaration to use "every weapon" to blunt the Chinese offensive, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee flew to Washington. He received assurance that the United States would use the atomic bomb only if UN forces faced annihilation. The British also berated the Truman administration for failing to consult with them prior to the June 1952 raids against the Yalu River hydroelectric plants. With the President's concurrence, in the fall of 1950 the Joint Chiefs had prohibited attacks on the facilities, and the restriction remained until Clark requested its removal in mid-June 1952. The British outcry led the State Department to inform them prior to further attacks near the Soviet or Manchurian border.⁷⁵ The British also established a liaison office in General Clark's headquarters to receive such information.

To officers who had fought the Second World War with virtually no political guidelines on bombing, the White House controls often caused confusion. Upon

⁷³Gregory A. Carter, Some Historical Notes on Air Interdiction in Korea (September 1966), RAND Corporation Paper No. 3432, p. 6.

⁷⁴USAF Study No. 127, p. 4. On 8 October 1950, two F-80s attacked a Soviet airfield near Vladivostok by mistake and caused heavy damage. The Soviets protested loudly, and both Truman and Eisenhower sought to assure that no such incidents would happen again.

⁷⁵Department of State Memo from John M. Allison to Mr. Matthews, 28 August 1952, in Korean War Files--Department of State, Harry S. Truman Library, Folder 49: Bombing of North Korean Power Plants, Box 13.

learning in December 1950 that he could not attack military installations in Manchuria, Stratemeyer wrote Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt S. Vandenberg. "When can we expect basic decisions which will orient us out here as to just what our mission is now that China is our enemy and just what instructions can I expect to receive so that I can inform my people?" the FEAF Commander asked.⁷⁶ When the controls remained after the beginning of negotiations, one disenchanted FEAF officer termed the air policy: "Don't employ air power so the enemy will get mad and won't sign the armistice."⁷⁷ Many high-ranking officers understood that the Truman administration sought to avoid a Third World War. Yet few viewed war with the Soviets as a likely possibility. "I know of not a single senior military commander of the United States forces in the Far East--Army, Navy, or Air Force--who believed the USSR would enter war with the United States because of any action we might have taken relative to Red China," commented Admiral C. Turner Joy, the chief UNC negotiator at Panmunjom.⁷⁸ General Nathan F. Twining, who replaced Vandenberg as Chief of Staff in May 1953, concurred. "We felt that [attacking Manchuria] would never bring on a war, and if it did, they [the Soviets] couldn't pick a better time to jump the United States," Twining remarked. "If they wanted to go to war with us, we might have taken them on then much easier than we could any other time. And we never felt, in the military particularly, that it would bring on a war. They weren't ready to [fight]. . . . They had a bad time in World War II."⁷⁹

Not all controls on the air war emanated from the White House; many stemmed from the theater commanders or the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After the Chinese assault, the Joint Chiefs recommended to MacArthur that he consider destroying the

⁷⁶Stratemeyer Diary, entry for 23 December 1950.

⁷⁷USAF Study No. 127, p. 5.

⁷⁸Admiral C. Turner Joy, How Communists Negotiate (Santa Monica: Fidelis Publications, Inc., 1955, 1970), p. 176.

⁷⁹Oral History Interview of Nathan F. Twining by John T. Mason, Jr., 12 September 1967, Arlington, VA, Eisenhower Library, p. 196.

Yalu River hydroelectric plants if the enemy crossed the 38th parallel. Instead of requesting authority to attack the plants, the general noted that "their preservation or destruction is predominantly a political rather than a mil[itary] matter." He added: "The reversal of this decision involves considerations far beyond those of the immediate tactical campaign in Korea."⁸⁰ Like MacArthur, Ridgway also refused to bomb the power facilities. The UNC Commander vetoed Weyland's May 1952 proposal to attack all North Korean hydroelectric plants, although with the exception of the Sui-ho plant on the Yalu Ridgway had authority to order the strikes. Clark had no such misgivings. When he ordered the strikes in June, he secured Truman's approval, through the Joint Chiefs, to bomb the Sui-ho plant as well.⁸¹ The Joint Chiefs and Ridgway both restricted attacks against Pyongyang. The JCS disapproved of attacking the North Korean capital in the summer of 1951 because "to single out Pyongyang as the target for an all-out strike during the time we are holding conferences might in the eyes of the world appear as an attempt to break off negotiations."⁸² Ridgway allowed Weyland to bomb the city, but limited the areas open to attack.⁸³ Weyland, however, was reluctant to raid the irrigation dam system, despite his authority to do so at any time during Clark's tenure. Echoing Baker's "man in the street" statement, the FEAF Commander, who had served as George Patton's tactical air chief, sanctioned attacks only against those dams

⁸⁰JCS message to CINCFE, 99713, 26 December 1950; CINCFE message to JCS, 52125, 27 December 1950 in Korean War File--Department of Defense, Harry S Truman Library, Folder: Pertinent Papers on Korean Situation (Vol. II), Box 15.

⁸¹Futrell, *USAF in Korea*, p. 447. Commented Weyland: "I don't know why Ridgway wouldn't let me do it [bomb the electric plants]. He said, 'Oh, that would be politically unacceptable.' I said, 'Oh crap,' or words to that effect. Anyhow, we didn't. He was my boss, and he wouldn't let me do it. I said, 'Well, the JCS has cleared it.' He said, 'Well, the time isn't right,' or something. So Ridgway left and Mark Clark came in . . . He [Clark] said, 'Why those are juicy targets. Why haven't you done it?' I said, 'Ridgway wouldn't let me.' He said, 'Well, let's get about it.' So we clobbered them in very quick order." Weyland interview, 19 November 1974, pp. 107, 113.

⁸²USAF Study No. 127, p. 5.

⁸³Weyland interview, 19 November 1974, p. 112.

which would, if breached, cause floodwaters to wipe out North Korean lines of communication.

Neither Stratemeyer nor Weyland controlled the entire air effort against North Korea, and the lack of command unity obstructed air operations. Navy, Marine, and allied air forces (notably, from Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa) flew against the North as did the FEAF. While a Formal Target Committee met biweekly to select targets for FEAF's two components, Fifth Air Force and Bomber Command, the Air Force made little effort to coordinate with the Navy's Seventh Fleet, which operated in the Sea of Japan. After the FEAF Commander approved target recommendations, the committee notified Seventh Fleet Headquarters of the selections. The Seventh Fleet Commander also directed that naval air chiefs give the FEAF advance notice of independently planned air strikes. This "coordination by mutual agreement" did not always work, and the Navy's first strike against North Korea, in early August 1950, came as a complete surprise to Stratemeyer.⁸⁴ Yet the Air Force did not invite a Navy representative to attend the FEAF Target Committee meetings until 22 July 1953, one week before the armistice.⁸⁵

In addition to political and military controls on bombing, other difficulties restricted the air effort. Communist air defenses destroyed 1,041 FEAF aircraft during the war and caused B-29s to fly only at night after October 1951.⁸⁶ The limited payload and range of the F-80 jet fighter, together with production lags, forced the use of the F-51 Mustang until January 1953. As in World War II, weather hampered efforts to conduct continuous operations against enemy supply lines. Communist countermeasures also plagued the FEAF's attempts at interdiction. MiG-15 jets, air defense radar, and anti-aircraft artillery guarded lines of communication that labor

⁸⁴Futrell, USAF in Korea, p. 115.

⁸⁵"Minutes of the FEAF Formal Target Committee Meeting, 22 July 1953," FEAF Formal Target Committee Minutes, 22 July 1953, AFHRC, file number K720.151A.

⁸⁶Futrell, p. 645.

crews maintained without the aid of heavy equipment. Supplemented by individuals carrying A-frames, horse-drawn wagons, oxcarts, and pack animals, trucks and trains traveled mostly at night, preventing interception by either F-51s or F-80s. Although the F-51 could locate targets at night, rocket and gunfire blinded its pilot, while the F-80 achieved poor results trying to strafe at jet speeds.⁸⁷ The Communists also resorted to deception, often removing a section of rail or a bridge span at the end of night activities to give the appearance of unserviceability.⁸⁸

BOMBING RESULTS

The FEAF dropped 476,000 tons of ordnance during the conflict, and Navy and Marine aircraft together delivered 202,000 tons. Despite the difficulties of conducting interdiction, FEAF's various campaigns destroyed 827 bridges, 116,839 buildings, 869 locomotives, 14,906 railroad cars, and 74,859 vehicles, and halted all but four or five percent of North Korea's prewar rail traffic. Over 300,000 laborers worked in repair gangs along transportation lines. The attacks against hydroelectric plants in June 1952 rendered 11 of 13 unserviceable with the remaining two in doubtful condition, resulting in a complete power blackout over North Korea for more than two weeks. The Communists succeeded in restoring these plants to only ten percent of their former capacity. In addition to washing out six miles of railroad and five bridges, the raid on the Toksan dam destroyed 700 buildings and five square miles of rice crops. All told, UN aircrews claimed to have killed 184,808 enemy troops; North Korea announced that the 11 July 1952 attack on Pyongyang caused 7,000 casualties.⁸⁹

Although the interdiction and air pressure campaigns inflicted heavy losses, the destruction did not by itself compel the Communists to agree to an armistice.

⁸⁷Carter, p. 6.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 5-18. Carter's study provides an excellent synthesis on the difficulties of carrying out interdiction in Korea.

⁸⁹Carter, p. 2; Futrell, *USAF in Korea* pp. 452, 482, 626, 645; Weyland, pp. 396, 398.

With the halt of Lieutenant General James Van Fleet's offensive in the late spring of 1951, air power became the sole ostensible means of forcing a settlement. Yet the bombing remained limited in scope by both political and military controls. Commented Admiral Joy: "United Nations Command negotiators at Kaesong and Panmunjom were not in a position to deal from maximum strength, and well did the Communists know it."⁹⁰ With the static front that developed after the truce talks began, enemy troops needed very little sustenance to maintain their position.⁹¹ The Communist negotiators stalled for time hoping that the UN bargaining position would weaken under the strain of mounting casualties. Eisenhower's advisors observed in April 1953 that

Whatever the Communist basic attitude towards an armistice may be, the ability of the Communists to supply and reinforce their troop strength in Korea has unquestionably reinforced their unwillingness to concede in the POW question what is possibly to them an important matter of principle and prestige striking at the roots of their system. They may well consider that agreement to any form of non-forcible repatriation so admits to the right of individual self-determination as to endanger maintenance of their concept of relations between the individual and the state.⁹²

Until June 1953, the Communists adamantly refused to accept UN terms on prisoner release as the basis for an armistice. On 23 May UN negotiators announced their commitment to voluntary repatriation as a "final" stand. The Communists denounced the proposal as unacceptable and requested a recess to prepare an official reply. When negotiations resumed on 4 June the Communists seemed more conciliatory, and on the 8th they signed a prisoner exchange agreement accepting the UN position. South Korean President Syngman Rhee's independent release of Communist prisoners on 18 June delayed an armistice by more than a month, but on 27 July both sides initiated a settlement that differed little from the 8 June terms.

⁹⁰Joy, pp. 165-66.

⁹¹On 17 April 1951, two months before the front stabilized, Stratemyer noted that Communist forces required 3120 tons of supply per day, and that North Korean lines of communication had the capacity to provide up to 5125 tons daily. See Stratemyer Diary, entry for 17 April 1951.

⁹²NSC 147, 2 April 1953, FR, 1952-54, Vol. 15: Korea, pt. 1, p. 842.

While the May attacks against the dams did not directly produce the Communists' about-face, the raids did, in combination with other factors, contribute to their desire to negotiate seriously. Foremost among these concerns was Eisenhower's willingness to use atomic weapons and expand the war.⁹³ Dulles communicated this message to Nehru during a visit to India that began on 22 May, and three days later the Communist negotiator in Panmunjom demanded a recess. The May strikes on the dams--targets hitherto untouched--began on the 13th and ended on the 29th. The North Koreans could prevent bombing from breaching a dam only by draining its reservoir. This measure had the same effect as breaching the structure, for it denied vital water to the young rice crops planted at the start of the spring season. The attacks all came against dams in the northwest, an area so important for rice production that the North Koreans dispatched troops there each spring to help with the planting.⁹⁴ The Communists responded to the Toksan raid by building a special railroad to the dam to carry repair materials. They also mounted their most intense propaganda campaign of the war, denouncing American "imperialist aggressors attempting to destroy the rice crop by denying the farmers the life water necessary to grow rice."⁹⁵ In short, the raids threatened massive starvation, and the Communists had no effective means to counter the attacks. Whatever their intent as interdiction measures, the raids appeared to the Communists as direct attacks on the civil populace. As such, they gave credence to Eisenhower's promise to unleash a nuclear holocaust across the North Korean and Manchurian landscapes.

⁹³Keefer, pp. 282, 287, 289. Keefer's analysis of Eisenhower's "atomic ultimatum" is the most thorough to date, evaluating contentions in many secondary works in the light of documents recently reproduced in The Foreign Relations of the United States and others maintained in Presidential libraries. He concludes that "Eisenhower ended the war by accepting the possibility of atomic warfare and even global conflict."

⁹⁴"Minutes of FEAF Formal Target Committee Meeting, 24 March 1953."

⁹⁵"The Attack on the Irrigation Dams in North Korea," Air University Quarterly Review 6 (Winter 1953-54): 55.

In addition to the threat of atomic war, the Communists faced the prospect of continued fighting in a conflict that had already cost them heavily in manpower and equipment. The North Korean industrial and transportation systems were in shambles after three years of war. The attacks against the dams portended destruction of the agricultural system as well. Wrecking North Korea's capability to grow rice threatened its survival as a nation, a prospect that appealed to neither Pyongyang nor Peking. With the increasing devastation of their country, the North Koreans feared that they could not prevent the Chinese from keeping troops permanently below the Yalu. "The North Korean desire to salvage their country was a major factor in obtaining serious negotiations," remarked Dean Rusk, Truman's Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.⁹⁶ The Chinese, however, had no desire to usurp the polity of their Communist ally. They had intervened specifically to preserve North Korean sovereignty, which they rightly believed threatened by the UN advance in the fall of 1950. A substantially weakened North Korea lacked the ability to serve as an effective buffer against invasion by UN or South Korean troops. Further, the potential loss of the North Korean rice crop posed a serious problem for Chinese forces on the 38th parallel. While the Communist troops needed little in the way of materiel to maintain their static positions, they relied heavily on northwest Korea for food. The lack of rice would have limited their capability to continue fighting.

Besides concerns over Eisenhower's threat and North Korean devastation, the Communists also had to face the changed political situation caused by the death of Stalin. The Soviet dictator had approved North Korean Premier Kim Il Sung's plan to invade the South and in the fall of 1950 had encouraged Chinese intervention.⁹⁷ The new Soviet leadership did not, however, contain a central source of power committed to the Communist struggle in Korea. Soon after Stalin's demise in March, George

⁹⁶Rusk interview, 15 July 1985.

⁹⁷Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1970), pp. 367-372.

Malenkov, Lavrentii Beria, and Nikita Khrushchev began to compete for control, and a distinct head of state did not emerge for the remainder of the Korean War. If they were to continue the conflict, the Chinese and North Koreans would have fought without Moscow's firm support.

The American interdiction campaign prevented the Communists from launching a large-scale offensive after the summer of 1951 and guaranteed that UN forces could maintain their positions near the 38th parallel. By restricting rail traffic to five percent of its prewar level, the FEAF denied the Communists the logistical support necessary to sustain a massive thrust. Yet the inability of the Chinese and North Koreans to mount an offensive did not necessarily indicate that air power was successful in restricting enemy action. After June 1951 the Communists may never have intended to launch another mass attack. Air power removed the option, but the effort may have been wasted.

Despite the failure of air power to secure an armistice independent of other considerations, many in the Air Force believed that bombing made the significant contribution towards achieving a truce. The "freedom to target and to use airpower [during 1953] brought the war to an acceptable conclusion," reflected General William W. Momyer, a member of the Air War College Faculty during the Korean conflict and Seventh Air Force Commander in Vietnam. "Interdiction was the fundamental mission that pressured a settlement."⁹⁸ The FEAF unit history for July 1953 observed that "the destructive force of FEAF's air power had broken the stalemate."⁹⁹ Most air chiefs thought that bombing would have produced decisive results in far less time had fewer political controls limited the air campaign. Stratemeyer, who was a staff officer for Arnold during World War II, voiced his objections not only to the political controls but also to the limited nature of the United States' war aims:

⁹⁸William W. Momyer, Air Power in Three Wars (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 172.

⁹⁹FEAF Operations Policy Korea Mid-1952: An Addendum, p. 5.

It [the American military objective] is contrary to everything that every military commander that I have been associated with or from all of our history--he has never been in a position where he could not win the war he started to win. That is not American. That is not American. [sic] And who did it--I don't know. I know that General MacArthur's hands were tied, I am sure, not by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but by the . . . State Department. I make that as my opinion, and I still believe it.¹⁰⁰

Joy agreed, listing his greatest handicap during the negotiations as the "reluctance or inability . . . of Washington to give us firm and minimum positions which would be supported by national policy."¹⁰¹ He believed that the Communists would respond only to massive force, and that Truman's unwillingness to urge such a policy foredoomed American negotiating efforts prior to the spring of 1953.

Most commanders who criticized the limited nature of the bombing aimed their barbs at the political leadership and ignored the military's self-imposed restraints. Many generals like Stratemeyer had earlier participated in all-out offensives against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and they could see no reason why the Communists in Korea should not be similarly destroyed. LeMay, who observed the conflict from Omaha, Nebraska, as the Commander of Strategic Air Command (SAC), suggested at the start of hostilities that his B-29s blast North Korea's principal cities. "The B-29s were trained to go up there to Manchuria and destroy the enemy's potential to wage war," LeMay reasoned. "The threat of this impending bombardment would, I am confident, have kept the Communist Chinese from revitalizing and protracting the Korean War."¹⁰² The general disapproved of using B-29s for interdiction, and argued that the bomber "was never intended to be a tactical weapon."¹⁰³ Weyland attempted to use air power as a bludgeon to compel a negotiated settlement. Yet his air pressure

¹⁰⁰US Congress, Senate, The Korean War and Related Matters: Report of the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and other Security Laws to the Committee on the Judiciary, 84th Cong., 1st sess., 1955, p. 10.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰²LeMay with Kantor, p. 464.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 459.

strategy was a bludgeon fashioned for Spaatz's daylight campaign in Europe rather than LeMay's fire attacks on Japan. While believing that his policy was in concert with American political objectives, and that it had a decisive impact on the Communist decision to quit fighting, Weyland also concluded that his predilection for attacking only military-related targets might prove inappropriate for a future war. Writing in the fall of 1953, he asserted:

If the nation under attack (by the United States) were the primary instigator and supporter of the aggression, or if the ground forces were not committed in the air campaign, or if the air forces were balanced to the concept of completely investing the enemy by air, the systems chosen for attack might be, and quite possibly would be, quite different.¹⁰⁴

The editors of Air University Quarterly Review, the official publication of the Air War College, provided an additional vision of the future. In a 1954 article on the dam raids, they proclaimed: "Modern war mobilizes total national resources. Only warfare that cuts sharply across the entire depth of the enemy's effort can bring the war to an end short of exhaustion and economic collapse for both sides."¹⁰⁵

THE POST-KOREA DECADE: DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENTS AND THOUGHTS ON LIMITED WAR

AIR FORCE DOCTRINE, 1954-1965

In October 1954, Paul Nitze told the assembled officers of the Air War College that the principal threat to American security interests stemmed "from the Kremlin design of world domination." He outlined the Soviet leadership's priorities as "first, the maintenance of their regime; second, the preservation of their power base in Russia and its satellites; and third, the objective of world dominance."¹⁰⁶ Nitze's observations

¹⁰⁴Weyland, p. 397.

¹⁰⁵"The Attack on the Irrigation Dams in North Korea," p. 60.

¹⁰⁶Paul Nitze, "The Relationship of the Political End to the Military Objective," Air War College Lecture, October 1954, AFHRC file number K239.716254-55, p. 12. Nitze was president of the Foreign Service Educational Foundation at the time of his address.

had a special appeal for his audience, for he had served as Vice Chairman of the Strategic Bombing Survey and, during the Korean War, as Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Council. Still, his message was more a confirmation than revelation. To Air Force senior officers, the Soviet Union was the enemy. Service doctrine reflected the conviction that the United States would one day confront the Soviets in general war--a euphemism for global, nuclear conflict.

The Eisenhower administration's policy of "massive retaliation," combined with the Soviet explosion of the hydrogen bomb, a perceived "bomber gap," and the launching of Sputnik, contributed to the Air Force's priority on preparing for nuclear war. America's nuclear arsenal jumped from a total of 1,750 weapons in 1954 to 26,500 in 1962, with more than 11,000 added between 1958 and 1960.¹⁰⁷ Strategic Air Command controlled the vast majority of these arms and planned to deliver most of them in a massive pre-emptive bomber assault against the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁸ "The emphasis of air planners was on making war fit a weapon--nuclear air power--rather than making the weapon fit a war," commented one historian of the period.¹⁰⁹ Nowhere was this emphasis more manifest than in the Air Force's two chief doctrinal publications of the post-Korea decade, Manuals 1-2 and 1-8.

Air planners produced two versions of Manual 1-2, "Basic Doctrine," in the decade after Korea. Both stressed that American military forces could perform "their greatest and most economical service in any form of international conflict" by allowing the United States to "exercise a compelling initiative in international

¹⁰⁷Futrell, "Influence," p. 266.

¹⁰⁸David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960," International Security 7 (Spring 1983): 66.

¹⁰⁹Futrell, "Influence," p. 269.

affairs."¹¹⁰ Strategic bombing offered the means to demonstrate "compelling initiative," and Manual 1-8, "Strategic Air Operations," outlined how bombing would achieve national goals. Dated 1 May 1954, the document steered Air Force thinking throughout the post-Korea decade. Air planners did not revise it until December 1965.

Manual 1-8 hearkened to the teachings of the Air Corps Tactical School and the perceived lessons of World War II strategic bombing. Little guidance emerged from the experience of Korea. The manual defined strategic air operations as attacks "designed to disrupt an enemy nation to the extent that its will and capability to resist are broken."¹¹¹ These operations "are conducted directly against the nation itself" rather than against its deployed armed forces.¹¹² Destroying the war-making capacity of a nation would "neutralize" its armies and navies. Such destruction would also lead to the collapse of an enemy's will to fight. Air planners contended that

Somewhere within the structure of the hostile nation exist sensitive elements, the destruction or neutralization of which will best create the breakdown and loss of the will of that nation to further resist. . . . The fabric of modern nations is such a complete interweaving of major single elements that the elimination of one element can create widespread influence upon the whole. Some of the elements are of such importance that the complete elimination of one of them would cause collapse of the national structure insofar as integrated effort is concerned. Others exert influence which, while not immediately evident, is cumulative and transferable, and when brought under the effects of air weapons, results in a general widespread weakening and eventual collapse.¹¹³

¹¹⁰Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 April 1955, p. 3; Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 December 1959, p. 5; author's italics. Air Force Manual 1-1 replaced 1-2 on 13 August 1964. It stated: "Of utmost importance . . . is that we maintain superior capabilities for the higher intensities of war. Such a posture makes it evident to an enemy that if conflict escalates the advantage will become more and more clearly ours." See p. 1-3.

¹¹¹Air Force Manual 1-8, 1 May 1954, p. 6.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, p. 4.

The authors concluded that destroying petroleum or transportation systems would cause the most damage to a nation's will to resist. Only "weighty and sustained attacks," however, would succeed in wrecking either system.¹¹⁴

Eisenhower's budgetary controls facilitated the development of Strategic Air Command into the offensive force envisioned by Manual 1-8's authors. The perceived threat of nuclear war with the Soviets caused SAC to receive priority funding from an administration committed to fiscal restraint. "We could never support all of the forces . . . that might be required to meet all possible eventualities simultaneously," remarked Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson in 1957.¹¹⁵ SAC expanded not only at the expense of the Army and Navy, but also to the detriment of the Air Force's Tactical Air Command (TAC), which contained primarily single-seat "fighter" aircraft. To meet financial constraints, the Air Force eliminated several tactical fighter wings in the late 1950s.¹¹⁶ Lamented former Air Force Secretary Thomas K. Finletter: "We are still several billion dollars short of the amount we ought to be spending exclusively for the air power we need to handle the threat from Russia in the NATO area. . . . There is nothing like enough air power in our present United States military force levels to back up our foreign policy in the Far East."¹¹⁷ The paucity of funds for air missions other than strategic, nuclear bombing caused RAND analyst Bernard Brodie to note, with a large measure of truth, that "strategy wears a dollar sign."¹¹⁸

To the Commander-in-Chief of Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC), a defense policy stressing strategic, nuclear air power was more than just a proper emphasis on

¹¹⁴Ibid., pp. 3, 8.

¹¹⁵US Congress, Senate, Airpower: Report of the Subcommittee on the Air Force of the Committee on Armed Services, January 23, 1957, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 1957, p. 71.

¹¹⁶Futrell, "Influence," p. 266.

¹¹⁷Thomas K. Finletter, "Air Power and Foreign Policy, Especially in the Far East," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 299 (May 1955): 84-5.

¹¹⁸Bernard Brodie, Strategy in the Missile Age (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 358.

the Air Force's perceived ability to achieve an independent decision in war. General Curtis LeMay viewed SAC as the premier guardian of American democracy. As CINCSAC from 1948 to 1957, he molded the force into a highly-disciplined unit possessing awesome attacking power. SAC's mission "was to serve as deterrent against the enemy--a deterrent against nuclear warfare--a striking force so efficient and so powerful that no enemy could, in justice to his own present and future, attack us--through a sneak assault or any other way," LeMay reflected.¹¹⁹ The general geared his command to the "worst case" scenario of a full-scale nuclear exchange. In such a confrontation, SAC would deliver the Air Force's nuclear arsenal against Soviet targets in one massive blow.¹²⁰ From 1951 on, LeMay did not submit his annually updated war plans for JCS review, and by 1955 he had gained virtual autonomy in target selection.¹²¹ His influence resulted in CINCSAC's designation in the fall of 1960 as the "Director of Strategic Target Planning," with authority to develop, on behalf of the JCS, a Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) for a potential nuclear war. For all the armed services--particularly for the Air Force--the SIOP became the highest priority mission and severely limited availability for other tasks.¹²²

One year after the birth of the SIOP, LeMay became Air Force Chief of Staff. He had served as Vice Chief since 1957, during a period when the Army generals such as Ridgway, James Gavin, and Maxwell Taylor had advocated a defense policy based on "flexible response" rather than massive retaliation. Under LeMay's tutelage, however, the Air Force raised the strategic bomber on an even higher pedestal. "He was the one who made the strategic thing everything," observed Brigadier General Noel F. Parrish, who was in the Pentagon during LeMay's tenure as Chief of Staff. "He not only channeled a terrific portion of our resources into strategic [forces], but he filled a

¹¹⁹LeMay with Kantor, p. 6.

¹²⁰Rosenberg, p. 42; Futrell, "Influence," p. 266.

¹²¹Rosenberg, p. 37.

¹²²Ibid., p. 68.

whole headquarters with strategic Air Force people."¹²³ After LeMay had served three years as Chief, three-fourths of the highest-ranking Air Force officers in the Pentagon came directly from SAC.¹²⁴ To these individuals, strategic bombing was the Air Force mission, and Manual 1-8 offered the guidance to accomplish that mission successfully.

Air Force doctrine in the post-Korea decade did not completely disregard the Korean experience. Manual 1-2 acknowledged that limited war might recur. The document distinguished between general and limited conflict, stating that in each military forces sought different objectives. In general war, all American military strength "would be directed to the common purpose of prevailing over the enemy by defeating his offensive forces and denying him the resources with which to continue war." In limited conflict, "the composition of the participating forces, their missions and strategy, would be dictated primarily by the Government's objectives in relation to that particular conflict situation."¹²⁵ Air planners realized that government controls would prohibit limited war operations from approaching the intensity of those in general war. The 1959 edition of 1-2 deleted the 1955 observation that "employment of air forces must be undertaken with the expectation of sustaining the operation until the desired effect is accomplished."¹²⁶ Regardless of political controls, planners believed that the Air Force possessed the means to achieve decisive results in limited war. With one eye on Korea, they remarked that the service could conduct effective attacks without having to penetrate "a major opponent's sovereign territory."¹²⁷ If a

¹²³USAF Oral History Interview of Brigadier General Noel F. Parrish by Dr. James C. Hasleriff, 10-14 June 1974, San Antonio, Texas, AFHRC file number 239.0512-744, pp. 203-04.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 204. Parrish examined an organizational chart of Air Force offices in the Pentagon to obtain this information.

¹²⁵Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 December 1959, p. 4.

¹²⁶Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 April 1955, p. 5.

¹²⁷Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 December 1959, p. 11.

limited conflict occurred, the Air Force would apply "precisely measured power directly against specific elements of hostile strength."¹²⁸

Although they conceded the possibility of limited war, air planners made few preparations for it. In March 1954, they published Manual 1-7, "Theater Air Forces in Counter Air, Interdiction and Close Air Support Operations," to guide "tactical" air actions. The document revealed that theater, or tactical, air operations differed from strategic actions in two fundamental ways. First, theater forces conducted operations in a confined geographical area, while strategic actions were global in nature. Second, the objective of theater operations was the destruction or neutralization of an enemy's military forces, while strategic efforts sought to defeat the enemy nation by destroying "the essential elements of the nation's total organization for waging war . . . as distinct from its deployed military forces."¹²⁹ Single-seat fighter aircraft could accomplish strategic tasks. Yet air planners viewed interdiction, with its objective to destroy an enemy's military potential prior to its manifestation on the battlefield, as a tactical function. The TAC Commander was responsible for approving interdiction planned by theater air chiefs and for ordering tactical air forces to accomplish it.¹³⁰ Despite the disparity noted in Manuals 1-7 and 1-8 between tactical and strategic operations, both documents stressed planning for general rather than limited war, and both advocated using atomic weapons. "The best preparation for limited war is proper preparation for general war," wrote the authors of Manual 1-2. "The latter is the more important since

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹²⁹Air Force Manual 1-7, 1 March 1954, p. 1; Air Force Manual 1-8, 1 May 1954, p. 2.

¹³⁰Air Force Manual 1-7, 1 March 1954, pp. 2, 15.

there can be no guarantee that a limited war would not spread into general conflict."¹³¹

To air commanders in the post-Korea decade, theater forces provided a means to complement the massive blows of strategic bombers in general war. Major General Edward J. Timberlake, Commander of TAC's Ninth Air Force, extolled his unit's nuclear capability in May 1956:

The build-up of theater-type air forces during recent years has been gratifying both from a technical and a combat standpoint. Most important has been the marriage of the atomic bomb with the single-seater jet fighter as well as with the light bombardment plane. Of no lesser significance is the tactical guided missile. A single fighter, with a crew of one, now has the destructive power of thousands of World War II bombers loaded with conventional ordnance.

Thus, it can be seen that technological progress, ingenuity, initiative and imagination have developed the tactical air forces to new and potent heights in all types of air operations.¹³²

In response to an "overt act by an aggressor nation," theater forces would, the general announced, "launch an atomic punch aimed . . . at turning the enemy military machine into a relatively innocuous group of men by depriving it of the means of waging war."¹³³

Timberlake's fighters formed part of TAC's nuclear Composite Air Strike Force (CASF), developed in mid-1955 with a mission to deploy to any world crisis location. To gain exposure to flying conditions "in the most probable [wartime] operating areas," TAC rotated CASF aircraft to Europe and Alaska for six month

¹³¹ Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 December 1959, p. 4. The 1961 edition of Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) Training Manual F-100 stated: "Nuclear training will in every instance take precedence over nonnuclear familiarization and qualification. It is emphasized that conventional training will not be accomplished at the expense of the higher priority nuclear training required by this manual." Quoted in David MacIsaac, "The Evolution of Air Power since 1945: The American Experience," in War in the Third Dimension: Essays in Contemporary Air Power, ed. R. A. Mason (London: Brassey's Defense Publishers, 1986).

¹³² Edward J. Timberlake, "Air Power Implications," Speech to Aviation Writers' Association Convention, San Francisco, California, 30 May 1956 in Speeches by Major General Timberlake, 1956-57, AFHRC file number K533.309-1, p. 3.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 9.

periods.¹³⁴ The strike force sported the new F-105 Thunderchief, a fighter designed to drop nuclear bombs and unsuited for air combat. Air planners considered the plane's inability to dogfight irrelevant. They contended that nuclear raids on enemy airfields combined with air superiority missions would guarantee a safe environment for the Thunderchief.¹³⁵

Most air commanders accepted the Air Force's priority on nuclear weapons. Manual 1-2 noted that the prerequisite for achieving a military objective was a strategy "as simple and as direct as possible," a requirement readily fulfilled by relying on the atomic bomb.¹³⁶ The Air Force's nuclear superiority over the Soviets compensated--air chiefs believed--for Russia's predominance in conventional weaponry.¹³⁷ Yet the possibility existed that the United States might never confront the Soviets in a general war. Weyland for one challenged the emphasis on a nuclear engagement. He felt that strong, conventional, theater air forces, backed by an announced willingness to use them, would have prevented the North Koreans from attacking in 1950. "It is obvious to me that we must have adequate tactical air forces in being that are capable of serving as a deterrent to the brush-fire type of war just as SAC is the main deterrent to a global war," he asserted in 1957. "Any fighting that we get into in the foreseeable future will very probably be of the peripheral war type."¹³⁸ Most senior officers who doubted the appropriateness of Air Force doctrine kept their misgivings to themselves. The text of Timberlake's 1956 speech to California aviation writers mentioned that present Soviet actions did "not foreshadow a general war," and Timberlake made a notation to omit the statement.¹³⁹ After LeMay "SACerized" the Pentagon, most high-ranking officers

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 5.

¹³⁵Futrell, "Influence," p. 266.

¹³⁶Air Force Manual 1-2, 1 December 1959, p. 7.

¹³⁷Parrish Oral History Interview, 10-14 June 1974, p. 201.

¹³⁸Airpower, p. 72.

¹³⁹Timberlake, p. 9.

possessed a sincere faith in the nuclear bomber's ability to decide international conflicts. Those who did not believe lacked the power to make any difference.

LIMITED WAR STUDIES

While the Air Force's leadership remained committed to the gospel of strategic nuclear attack, others questioned the dogma's propriety. In 1957 two studies concluded that the service needed to devote more attention to limited war preparation. RAND analyst Robert Johnson determined in a May report for Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) Headquarters that the danger of limited hostilities was "the most immediate threat" facing PACAF units. Johnson noted that directives to maintain general war capabilities narrowed the resources available to oppose local aggression. He did not think that those units in excess of the general war "retaliatory" force would suffice, in terms of numbers or competency, to repel attacks by guerrilla troops. "It is felt by many," the analyst remarked, "that neither the Tactical Air Forces in being, the Strategic Air Forces, the Air Forces of Allied countries, nor the air components of the Army, Navy, and Marines are particularly well-suited to perform the tasks which may be required of air power in local war." He highlighted the efforts of two RAND projects, dubbed SIERRA and RIOT SQUAD, to determine the Air Force's limited war requirements. Using war-gaming techniques, the SIERRA group had evaluated prospective air campaigns in Southeast Asia, but the group's findings remained "tentative and highly controversial." RIOT SQUAD, examining weapons and support systems required by air forces opposing local aggressions, also produced uncertain conclusions. Johnson pointed out that the group had failed to devote adequate attention to the "mission and modus operandi" of air units engaged in limited conflict.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰Robert B. Johnson, "RAND Studies of Air Power in Limited Wars," 21 May 1957, AFHRC file number K720.3102-7, pp. 1-10.

Johnson's counterpart at Air University, Colonel Ephraim M. Hapton, agreed that the Air Force needed to prepare for limited engagements. In his March study "The USAF in Limited War," he stressed what he felt was a major dilemma confronting air planners who molded service doctrine: how to guarantee that the Air Force possessed adequate means to cope with both general and limited conflict. Unlike Johnson, Hapton accepted the heavy commitment of forces to general war preparation. The colonel focused instead on "whether these limited war forces in excess of the hard core total war requirements should be specially developed air task forces." He determined that special units would only interfere with the mission of theater air forces, which already had responsibility for operations in potential trouble spots. Yet Hapton offered no advice on how to organize those theater forces exceeding general war requirements. "Generalizations concerning the type forces which could best be employed become exceedingly difficult," he declared. "Each area where a limited war could possibly occur will present different inherent theater capabilities, base structures, and logistic situations. The geography, target systems, and status of indigenous forces will vary. Political situations will present a variety of problems."¹⁴¹

Acknowledging that limited conflict could occur in disparate locales, Air University staff members produced a 1958 study evaluating the Air Force's ability to respond to small-scale conflicts in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and Korea. Bernard Brodie authored the project's final report. Before discussing political situations in the four areas, he provided general observations on the nature of limited war. Brodie asserted that a nation waging limited conflict must rely on "counterforce" tactics and strategies. This meant that the country would direct its military effort against opposing military forces rather than against "sources of national power." The strategy would cause the struggle to resemble a war of attrition.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹Colonel Ephraim M. Hapton, "The USAF in Limited War," 14 March 1957, Project File No. Au-1-57-ESAWAC, AFHRC file number K239.042957-1, pp. 1-9.

¹⁴²Bernard Brodie, The USAF in Limited War, AFHRC file number K239.042957-1, p. 7.

In contrast to his initial remarks, Brodie also stated that "the United States must use any weapon in its arsenal, as needed, to protect its national interest."¹⁴³ "Any weapon" included the atomic bomb. Should limited war erupt in any of the four areas examined, units from TAC's Composite Air Strike Force, Theater Air Forces, and SAC would likely participate. Brodie described how they could make the greatest impact on an enemy:

Airpower properly employed permits a graduated or mounting application of force and persuasion in which diplomatic negotiation can be integrated precisely either between separate sorties or at the culmination of achieving major objectives. Thus the Air Force is able to operate in a limited war situation by striking, returning to secure territory, negotiating, striking again as necessary and withdrawing repeatedly without the stigma of retreat ever being an issue.¹⁴⁴

Brodie believed that such a policy might prove useful in Vietnam. There, Ngo Dinh Diem's Southern regime appeared in danger of falling to Communism. "This indirect threat to US interests must be recognized as a matter of first concern to us in Southeast Asia," he contended, "for no amount of military equipment in weak or undecided hands will guarantee security from communist encroachment."¹⁴⁵

A year after the Air University study, Brodie published Strategy in the Missile Age. Despite focusing on air power's role in deterring--or winning--total war, the work offered guidance on a proper course for air forces in limited conflict. Brodie now doubted that nuclear weapons were appropriate for local wars. "The conclusion that nuclear weapons must be used in limited wars has been reached by too many people, too quickly, on the basis of far too little analysis of the problem," he argued.¹⁴⁶ Those whom the United States sought to defend would likely disapprove of "salvation" based on atomic blasts over their homeland. Equally as important, the use of nuclear weapons constituted a vast degree of difference from warfare waged by conventional

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁴⁶Brodie, Strategy, p. 330. Italics in original.

means. Atomic bombs in a limited conflict would greatly increase the chances of a general war.

Brodie's message went unheeded. In August 1957 National Security Advisor Robert Cutler had urged President Eisenhower to develop a credible policy for limited war. Cutler advised a reliance on "tactical atomic weapons" to counter Russian aggression "anywhere against any ally."¹⁴⁷ Eisenhower's support of this proposal sanctioned what was already three-year-old Air Force doctrine. That doctrine would not change--in either written or perceived form--for the next eight years.¹⁴⁸ While John Kennedy's enchantment with guerrilla warfare led to a revamping of Army doctrine, it had no effect on Air Force policy. LeMay guaranteed that his service would continue to emphasize strategic operations above all else and that theater air forces would perform tasks viewed as secondary. His perspective endured beyond his four-year tenure as Chief of Staff.

CONCLUSIONS

In May 1953, an ailing Hoyt Vandenberg made his final address as Air Force Chief of Staff. Speaking to the Air War College's class of senior officers, the general summarized his views on strategic air power:

Air power must not be applied except against the industrial power of the nation; it must not be applied unless you are going to win the war with it. I don't mean that once you have applied it, that you can't apply it to the other portions of war. But surely, let us not drop an A-bomb until we are ready to drop it on the industrial potential, too, or perhaps first. . . . Air power, if it is to be successful, has got to be launched against the industrial potential in the rear areas of a nation. Air power, without the A-bomb, must be so used. Air power should not be used on the front lines, except as an addition to the principle of destroying the industrial

¹⁴⁷Memo from Robert Cutler to President Eisenhower, "Limited War in the Nuclear Age," 7 August 1957, National Security Advisor Files, NSC Series, Briefing Notes Subseries, Eisenhower Library, Folder: Limited War (2), Box 12.

¹⁴⁸Much like its counterpart guiding strategic operations, Air Force Manual 1-7, dated 1 March 1954, remained current until 14 June 1965.

potential of a country. Let us keep our eye on the goal of air power, which is to knock out the ability of a nation to fight.¹⁴⁹

Vandenberg exhorted his audience to emphasize the value of air power to all who questioned its efficacy.

You must leave no stone unturned to spread the gospel and to do it in a proper way. Let us not claim that all you need is air power, because that is bunk. What we have to do is to point out where it fits into the overall security of the United States and what we must have as a minimum. . . . It [an appreciation of air power] is only going to come by you people who understand it and preach it and preach it [sic] to everybody who comes within contact of it. . . . It's your duty because, by God, . . . the only thing that is going to save the United States, is an understanding of this thing. So I hope that you go out and do it.¹⁵⁰

The officers listening to Vandenberg did indeed go out and spread the gospel, and LeMay became their chief prophet. Most air commanders in the post-Korea decade saw strategic bombing as a cure-all for any contingency. Several factors shaped their thinking: the ingrained dogma of the Air Corps Tactical School, the perceived success of strategic bombing in World War II and Korea, and Eisenhower's policy of massive retaliation. To the makers of Air Force doctrine, World War II overshadowed the Korean experience. The campaigns against Germany and Japan seemed to vindicate the ACTS philosophy of striking a nation's vital centers to destroy its war-fighting capability. Korea, while considered a victory for air power, was a success flawed by political controls that prohibited attacks against the source of Communist war-making capacity. The policy of massive retaliation portended future conflicts of unlimited scope, much like that waged during World War II in pursuit of unconditional surrender. Air leaders still believed that attacks directed against a nation's capability to fight would prove effective in weakening the will to resist. By destroying a nation's key industries, air power would wreck the social fabric of an

¹⁴⁹Hoyt Vandenberg, "Lecture to the Air War College," 6 May 1953, AFHRC file number K239.716253-126, pp. 6-7.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

enemy nation, and the Air Force now possessed the supreme weapon to devastate industrial capability--the atomic bomb.

Air planners geared doctrine towards a general war with the Soviet Union, and the Air Force's doctrinal tenets were appropriate only for a large-scale conflict against a highly-industrialized foe. Manual 1-8 observed that "the fabric of modern nations is . . . a complete interweaving of major single elements."¹⁵¹ Air commanders equated "modern" with "all." Despite realizing that North Korea was not a modern nation like World War II Germany or Japan, they believed that attacks on electric power would help destroy the enemy's social cohesion. They viewed the North not only as an integrated society, but also as one treasuring its meager industrial prowess. Yet the heart of North Korea was agriculture. Not until Weyland raided the irrigation dams in May 1953 did bombing prove truly threatening to the Communists. Weyland, however, was reluctant to attack the dams, both because he had personal misgivings about a campaign designed to starve people and because Air Force doctrine shunned direct attacks on enemy morale.¹⁵²

Weyland's dam raids were significant because of their timing as well as because of the target. Occurring within days of Dulles' communication that Eisenhower intended to mount a nuclear offensive, the raids demonstrated that the President meant to remove the war's political controls. With no negative objectives to restrain American military power, Eisenhower could devastate North Korea and Manchuria. Nuclear weapons would destroy populations in addition to military targets. The destruction of

¹⁵¹ Air Force Manual 1-8, 1 May 1954, p. 4.

¹⁵² One notes with interest that neither Clark in Korea nor Eisenhower in World War II had any reservations about targeting civilians to produce a quicker peace. This is not to imply that Army officers had less scruples than airmen about killing civilians, for Ridgway applied major restraints to the air campaign in Korea. Yet it may suggest that Air Force officers consider their mission, conducted at high altitude with the aid of modern technological assets, more pristine than that of their counterparts on the ground.

people threatened, much like the dam attacks, the existence of North Korea, and neither the Chinese nor the North Koreans would tolerate the country's demise.

American strategic bombing in World War II also threatened the national existence of an enemy. The absence of negative objectives, demonstrated by a policy of unconditional surrender, permitted the Army Air Forces to attack the Axis relentlessly. In targeting industrial capacity, the raids struck both an essential component of the enemy's ability to fight and a fundamental aspect of social organization. The industrial areas of Germany and Japan were "vital centers" of the nations' welfare. Their destruction threatened much more than the ability to win; it threatened survival.

The experience of World War II and Korea revealed that American political resolve influenced the effectiveness of air power as a political instrument. The more menacing air power appeared to an enemy's essential concerns, the more effective it was in accomplishing political objectives. Air Force and civilian leaders alike imperfectly understood this link between strategic targeting and national goals. Air commanders showed the lack of understanding in their doctrine; civilian authorities would display it when they tried to apply air power as a political tool in the skies over North Vietnam.

CHAPTER II

ROLLING THUNDER: WAR AIMS AND POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

We would have to calculate the effect of such military actions (as bombing North Vietnam) against a specified political objective. That objective, while being cast in terms of eliminating North Vietnamese control and direction of the insurgency, would in practical terms be directed toward collapsing the morale and the self-assurance of the Viet Cong cadres now operating in South Vietnam and bolstering the morale of the Khanh regime. We could not, of course, be sure that our objective could be achieved by any means within the practical range of our options.

Robert S. McNamara, 16 March 1964¹

Little more than a decade after the Korean War, the United States began fighting another limited conflict on the Asian continent. In many ways, the war in Vietnam paralleled the struggle in Korea: America fought to preserve an independent, non-Communist state; the Soviet Union and China backed the Communist aggressors; and negative objectives limited the application of United States military force. Once more, American political leaders relied on air power as a primary means to stop Communist encroachment. Yet the two wars displayed key differences: the geography of the conflicts varied greatly; the United Nations did not fight in Vietnam; the South Vietnamese government lacked the stability of its South Korean counterpart; and the

¹Memorandum from Robert S. McNamara to the President, "US Policy towards Viet Nam," 16 March 1964, National Security Files, NSC Meetings File, Vol. 1, Tab 5, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, Box 1, p. 7. This memorandum became NSAM 238 on 17 March.

Vietnam War, during the Lyndon Johnson era, was primarily a guerrilla struggle, while the war in Korea was throughout a conventional conflict.²

These distinctions--and others--produced unique circumstances for civilian leaders wrestling with the Vietnam war. For many Johnson administration officials, the backdrop of Korea colored their views on Vietnam. Several had spent their formative years as junior statesmen during the Korean War, and again they faced the possibility of Chinese (and Soviet) intervention on behalf of a Communist ally. They had also viewed Cold War crises in Berlin, Cuba, and Laos during John Kennedy's administration. Many officials perceived the North Vietnamese-backed insurgency in South Vietnam as part of a larger plan for Communist domination in Southeast Asia. After searching for a means to preserve a non-Communist South Vietnam, Johnson and his principal civilian advisors finally agreed on air power. The decision to bomb the North did not, however, represent a consensus over the air effort's political objectives. The "Rolling Thunder" air campaign was, in many respects, a compromise means to secure a myriad of results.

WAR AIMS

Four days after becoming President, Lyndon Johnson announced in National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273 that

it remains the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported communist conspiracy. The test of all US decisions and actions in this area should be the effectiveness of their contribution to this purpose.³

Four months later, NSAM 288 echoed these sentiments. The memorandum stemmed from a trip to Vietnam by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and

²The assertion that Vietnam, from 1964 to 1968, was "primarily a guerrilla struggle" contradicts Harry Summers' contention in On Strategy (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982) and will be explained fully in Chapter IV.

³NSAM 273, 26 November 1963, National Security Files, National Security Action Memorandums, Johnson Library, Boxes 1-9, p. 1.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor. The two examined the new South Vietnamese government of Nguyen Khanh, who had taken power in a coup on 30 January. McNamara concluded that the Khanh regime was in danger of collapsing to the North Vietnamese-backed Viet Cong and recommended that the United States assume an increased role in preserving the Southern government. Johnson agreed, designating the Secretary's written analysis of the situation as NSAM 288 on 17 March 1964. McNamara's memorandum noted that the United States sought "an independent non-Communist South Vietnam . . . [which] must be free . . . to accept outside assistance as required to maintain its security."⁴ This statement would serve as America's positive political objective until the President's decision at the end of March 1968 to curtail Rolling Thunder. McNamara emphasized that achieving this goal would yield not only an independent South Vietnam, but also a stable Southern government. In a March 1964 speech, he proclaimed: "When the day comes that we can safely withdraw, we expect to leave an independent and stable South Vietnam, rich with resources and bright with prospects for contributing to the peace and prosperity of Southeast Asia and the world."⁵

Although some advisors, notably Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy and Secretary McNamara, eventually abandoned their commitment to the memorandum's goal, the President remained devoted to it. "No matter how much we might hope for some things," a disheartened McNamara wrote Johnson two years after penning NSAM 288, "our commitment is not: . . . to guarantee that the self-chosen government [of South Vietnam] is non-Communist . . . and to insist that the independent South Vietnam remain separate from North Vietnam."⁶ The

⁴Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971), p. 283.

⁵Quoted in Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1969), p. 19.

⁶*The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision-making in Vietnam*, Senator Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Vol. 3: 172.

President thought otherwise. He rejected the Secretary's suggestion to issue a new NSAM redefining the American positive goal as a compromise peace. Johnson believed that reneging on the original commitment to South Vietnam would lead to weakened military ties in Europe and the Middle East. American allies "throughout the world would conclude our word was worth little or nothing," he reasoned. "Moscow and Peking could not resist the opportunity to expand their control into the vacuum of power we would leave behind us."⁷

NSAM 288 revealed the fear of Johnson and his principal civilian advisors that an American failure to stop the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam would result in the spread of Communism throughout Southeast Asia. They also believed that the fall of South Vietnam would produce a corresponding loss of American prestige around the world. The memorandum labeled the Vietnam conflict "as a test case of US capacity to help a nation meet a Communist 'war of national liberation.'"⁸ McNamara cautioned against overtly applying American military force to support the Southern government. He encouraged instead a program of "pacifying" the South Vietnamese populace with the aid of American military and economic advisors. Yet he acknowledged that direct military pressure against North Vietnam might one day be necessary. "The US at all levels must continue to make it emphatically clear that we are prepared to furnish assistance and support for as long as it takes to bring the insurgency under control," he observed.⁹

Numerous rationales blended to "justify" the positive political objective stated in NSAMs 273 and 288. Besides containing Communism and preserving American prestige, South Vietnam's survival would allow its inhabitants to secure "a destiny independent of Hanoi." Many administration officials believed that the United States

⁷Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Vantage Point (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), p. 152.

⁸Shuehan, p. 284. See also Johnson, p. 120.

⁹McNamara Memorandum, "US Policy towards Viet Nam," p. 8.

had a commitment to defend South Vietnam stemming from the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Taylor felt that American complicity in Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination demanded firm action to uphold South Vietnam. Chester Cooper, the Assistant for Asian Affairs on Johnson's White House Staff, asserted that a perceived sense of mission to save the world from Communism caused the United States to support the South. "Who wants to yield to China and the Soviet Union?" the President asked a Columbia University history professor. Johnson saw North Vietnam as a client state of the Communist superpowers, much like Truman had considered North Korea a nation controlled by Moscow.¹⁰ The President also believed that yielding to the North Vietnamese-directed insurgency would exhibit American impotence. "I was sure," Johnson remarked, "that once we showed how weak we were, Moscow and Peking would move in a flash to exploit our weakness. And so would begin World War III." While Johnson and his advisors all pursued the same positive goal--an independent, stable, non-Communist South Vietnam--they sought that goal for a multiplicity of reasons. Their differing concerns would affect how each viewed the idea of American military intervention.¹¹

In addition to the positive political objective, negative goals shaped the United States military effort. Johnson and his civilian advisors placed an overriding

¹⁰"It became increasingly clear that Ho Chi Minh's military campaign against South Vietnam was part of a larger, much more ambitious strategy being conducted by the Communists. . . . Peking was promising Hanoi full support and was urging 'wars of national liberation' as the solution to all the problems of non-Communist underdeveloped nations," wrote Johnson of the 1964-65 period. See *The Vantage Point*, p. 134.

¹¹Walt W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972), p. 435; Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1972), pp. 399-401; Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1970), pp. 417-420; Henry Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 149; Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Signet, 1976), p. 264. See also Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc.), pp. 116-17; Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982), pp. 130-31; and George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), pp. 142-43.

emphasis on preventing Chinese or Soviet active participation in the conflict. "Above all else, I did not want to lead this nation and the world into nuclear war or even the risk of such a war," the President commented.¹² After Nikita Khrushchev's ouster in late 1964, the Soviets invited North Vietnamese delegates to Moscow for talks, and in February 1965 they agreed to assist in "strengthening the defense potential" of the North. The Soviets signed an additional agreement for economic and military assistance in July.¹³ During this span the Chinese directed the North Vietnamese to refuse any American attempt to negotiate.¹⁴ Johnson thought that North Vietnam possessed secret treaties with the Chinese and Soviets, and that increasing force beyond a certain level would trigger Communist superpower involvement.¹⁵ That involvement could in turn lead to nuclear conflict. His fear of nuclear war was "difficult to overestimate," observed Secretary of State Dean Rusk. "That box [containing the command mechanisms needed to launch nuclear weapons] constantly followed the President and hung like a millstone around his neck."¹⁶

Rusk and McNamara both believed that dramatic moves to expand the war would have the direst consequences. "A commitment in South Vietnam is one thing," Rusk declared during a 22 July 1965 meeting of Johnson's top advisors, "but a commitment to preserve another socialist state is quite another. This is a distinction we must bear in mind."¹⁷ Attempting to occupy North Vietnam with conventional forces

¹²Johnson, p. 153.

¹³CIA Special Memorandum No. 11-65, "Future Soviet Moves in Vietnam," 27 April 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 3, Johnson Library, Box 41; CIA Special Memorandum No. 13-65, "Soviet Tactics Concerning Vietnam," 15 July 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 6, Johnson Library, Box 43.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Johnson, pp. 66-67.

¹⁶Interview of Dean Rusk by the author, Athens, Georgia, 15 July 1985.

¹⁷"Cabinet Room Meeting Notes, 22 July 1965," Meeting Notes File, 21-27 July 1965 Meetings on Vietnam, Johnson Library, Box 1, p. 22.

would, he felt, have resulted in nuclear war against China.¹⁸ As Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs during the Korean War, he had seen firsthand the effects of miscalculating Chinese intentions. McNamara, too, was sensitive to the prospects of a wider war. Although not a member of the Truman administration, he (like Rusk) had played a key role in resolving the Cuban missile crisis, the world's closest brush with nuclear holocaust.

Preventing Chinese or Soviet intervention--and hence World War III--became a goal of equal importance to that of establishing South Vietnamese independence. Yet the objective was a negative one that limited the application of force throughout Rolling Thunder. Nearly a month after the start of the 1968 Tet Offensive, the President told seamen on the carrier Constellation that he could do little to increase pressure on Hanoi. "We don't want a wider war," he declared. "They [the North Vietnamese] have two big brothers that have more weight and people than I have."¹⁹ To assure that the war remained limited, Johnson prohibited military actions that threatened, or that the Chinese or Soviets might perceive as threatening, the survival of North Vietnam. The President and his civilian advisors also made numerous announcements, both public and private, that the United States did not seek to destroy the Hanoi regime.²⁰

¹⁸Rusk interview, 15 July 1985. Walt W. Rostow, Chief of the State Department's Policy Planning Council and later Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, offers a contrasting opinion. "[There was] no way you could've got the Chinese involved, unless you went to the Red River Delta [with ground troops] and I'm not sure about that." Interview of Rostow by the author, Austin, Texas, 23 May 1986.

¹⁹"Summary of the President's Breakfast with Boys on Carrier Constellation," 19 February 1968, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Box 2.

²⁰Two copies of this message relay occurred in the winter of 1965. On 24 February, the American ambassador to Poland informed his Chinese counterpart that "the United States had no designs on the territory of North Vietnam, nor any desire to destroy the DRV [Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam]." Canadian emissary Blair Seaborn communicated the same message to Hanoi officials the next month. See The Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3:330.

Along with the desire to avoid a confrontation with the Communist superpowers, other negative objectives restrained the employment of military force. Foremost among these was Johnson's intention to preserve his domestic social programs. The vision of a "Great Society" was a longtime goal, and the President refused to let Vietnam shatter his dream. The war, however, presented him with a disturbing dilemma. He recalled:

I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the way I really loved--the Great Society--in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. . . . But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.²¹

Johnson feared that a massive increase in American force would divulge the seriousness of the threat to South Vietnam, thereby causing the focus of Congressional and public attention to shift away from the social programs that he cherished. A rapid increase in military pressure would have further repercussions. The President hoped to secure a favorable perception of the United States in Third World nations. Too much force in Vietnam might cause those countries to view the American effort as motivated by imperial ambitions or feelings of racial superiority. Johnson also wished to maintain the support of NATO and other Western allies. The greater the effort in Vietnam, the more allies elsewhere would question the ability of the United States to sustain its many military commitments.

Johnson's negative objectives produced the major principle of American strategy in Vietnam: gradual response. America's political leaders believed that military force was necessary to guarantee the South's existence, yet, because of negative objectives, they could not commit unlimited military power. Johnson and his advisors slowly increased the tempo of America's combat involvement, pausing frequently to

²¹Kearns, p. 263.

examine results in the light of both positive and negative goals. Many individuals, including large numbers of high-ranking officers, viewed the military effort as an uncoordinated series of fits and starts.²² In fact, the gradually escalating air and ground campaigns were carefully orchestrated attempts to achieve American political objectives. The orchestration lacked harmony, however. The conduct of Rolling Thunder epitomized the discord among the President's civilian counselors over how best to employ air power to achieve the nation's war aims. The group never attained unanimity on Rolling Thunder's purpose, and, as a result, the air campaign's political goals often varied.

ROLLING THUNDER'S POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

RATIONALE FOR AN AIR CAMPAIGN, SPRING AND SUMMER, 1964

On 20 February 1964, Johnson told his principal civilian and military advisors to "speed up" contingency planning for "pressures against North Vietnam." "Particular attention should be given," he announced, "to shaping such pressures so as to produce the maximum credible deterrent effect on Hanoi."²³ With this directive, the President provided the initial political goal of a projected air campaign against North Vietnam. NSAM 238 phrased this objective as "eliminating North Vietnamese control and direction of the insurgency."²⁴ The memorandum offered two additional aims of a potential air effort: to destroy the morale of Viet Cong cadres, and to bolster the morale of the Southern regime. Further objectives emerged during the year preceding Rolling Thunder's initiation: to signal to Hanoi the firmness of American resolve to defend the South, to impose "a tax" on North Vietnam for supporting the insurgency, "to create

²²Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1977), pp. 24-25. Kinnard's work reveals perceptions of the war from 111 Army generals who commanded in Vietnam.

²³*Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, 3: 154.

²⁴McNamara Memorandum, "US Policy towards Viet Nam," p. 7.

conditions for a favorable settlement by demonstrating to the North Vietnamese that the odds are against their winning," and to increase American leverage with the Southern government.²⁵ None of these goals dominated the collective thinking of Johnson's civilian advisors regarding the merits of a bombing campaign. Military chiefs, meanwhile, viewed the objective of a potential air effort as eliminating North Vietnam's support of the insurgency. This dichotomy caused Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy to comment in June 1964 that a need existed for "a clearer definition of just what should be hit and how thoroughly, and above all, for what objective."²⁶

In NSAM 288, McNamara directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to develop a program of "Graduated Overt Military Pressure" against North Vietnam that would include "air attacks against military and possibly industrial targets."²⁷ American and South Vietnamese pilots would jointly conduct these raids, which could begin after a 30-day notice. The Secretary also proposed a more limited program of retaliatory raids which could begin after 72 hours notification. The JCS responded to McNamara's request on 17 April 1964 with Operations Plan (OPLAN) 37-64, developed by the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Admiral Harry D. Felt. The plan linked retaliatory raids to continuous bombing of gradually increasing intensity, thus allowing a sequential implementation of McNamara's two suggested programs. Felt's plan further assumed that the President would order an air campaign "for the purpose of: (1) causing the DRV [Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam] to stop supporting

²⁵Guenther Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 374; Rostow interview, 23 May 1986; McNamara Memorandum to the President, "Program of Expanded Military and Political Moves with Respect to Vietnam," 26 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC Meetings File, Vol. 3, Johnson Library, Box 1, p. 1; McGeorge Bundy Memorandum to the President, "A Policy of Sustained Reprisal," 7 February 1965, *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, 3:311.

²⁶*Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, 3:176.

²⁷McNamara Memorandum, "US Policy in Viet Nam," p. 7.

the Viet Cong and Pathet Lao and (2) reducing its capability to renew such support."²⁸ Targets included airfields, bridges, supply and ammunition depots, petroleum storage facilities, and North Vietnam's "industrial base." American and South Vietnamese forces would also mine North Vietnamese ports. The JCS estimated that, by augmenting the South Vietnamese Air Force with American Air Force and Navy air units available in the Western Pacific, infiltration targets such as supply depots and petroleum storage areas could be destroyed in 12 days, and the remaining targets in an additional 34.²⁹

In late May, the JCS modified their plan. As part of a "Thirty-Day Vietnam Scenario" developed by the State Department, the Joint Chiefs proposed air strikes beginning on Day Fifteen against North Vietnam's transportation system. Mining would accompany the effort. Attacks would then occur against targets having "maximum psychological effect on the North's willingness to stop the insurgency--POL [Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants] storage, selected airfields, barracks/training areas, bridges, railroad yards, port facilities, communications, and industries." The raids would continue, despite expected negotiations, until the United States received "clear evidence" that North Vietnam had stopped supporting the insurgency.³⁰

None of the President's principal civilian advisors recommended that he should immediately execute the plan; instead, they advocated intensive diplomatic efforts at a settlement. McNamara refused to accept the Joint Chiefs' proposal without further information. On 30 May he asked the JCS to obtain CINCPAC's views on a series of questions. Among them were: "What military actions, in ascending order of gravity, might be taken to impress Hanoi with our intentions to strike North Vietnam? What should be the purpose and pattern of the initial air strike against North Vietnam?" and

²⁸Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 165. The start of a North Vietnamese-backed Communist offensive against Souvanna Phouma's Laotian government on 17 May caused the JCS to tailor their plans to supporting non-Communist forces in Laos as well as South Vietnam.

²⁹Ibid., p. 166.

³⁰Ibid., p. 168.

"How might North Vietnam and Communist China respond to these escalating pressures?"³¹

The Joint Chiefs replied to McNamara's queries in a 2 June memorandum by stating that they too suffered from an insufficient knowledge about potential warfare in Vietnam. They expressed anxiety over the "lack of a definition" of American military goals in Vietnam, declaring that it was "their first obligation to define a militarily valid objective for Southeast Asia and then advocate a desirable course of action to achieve that objective." As a result of this perceived void, the Joint Chiefs advised that "the United States should seek through military actions to accomplish destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capabilities as necessary to compel the Democratic Government of Vietnam to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos." Large doses of swiftly-applied air power would, they believed, accomplish the requisite damage. The officers drew a distinction between destroying North Vietnam's capability to support insurgencies and "an enforced changing of policy . . . which, if achieved, may well be temporary." They believed that this lesser objective was inadequate for the current situation, although they agreed that it could guide initial combat operations.³² "We recommended what we called a sharp, sudden blow which would have, in our opinion, done much to paralyze the enemy's capability to move his equipment around and supply people in the South," recalled Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell.³³

The Honolulu conference, convened in early June "to clarify issues with respect to exerting pressure on North Vietnam,"³⁴ showed that neither the Chairman of

³¹Cable from the Chairman, JCS to CINCPAC and CINCMACV, 30 May 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 74-75.

³²JCSM-471-64, 2 June 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 144, 172.

³³US Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, Air War against North Vietnam, 90th Cong., 1st sess., part 3, 22-23 August 1967, p. 212.

³⁴Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 172.

the Joint Chiefs nor the President's top civilian advisors agreed with the 2 June memorandum. Chairman Maxwell Taylor had not endorsed the document, and he argued against it in Hawaii. After the conference, he advised McNamara not to limit American options to large-scale air assaults. The future ambassador to South Vietnam believed that strikes of lesser intensity than those previously suggested by the Joint Chiefs would persuade North Vietnam to stop supporting the Viet Cong. He further noted that civilian officials would probably prefer "demonstrative strikes" that would permit them to increase intensity if the raids failed.³⁵

The Honolulu Conference also revealed the lack of consensus among the President's civilian counselors regarding the political utility of bombing North Vietnam. Attended by McNamara, Rusk, William Bundy, CIA Director John A. McCone, Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, and chief of the interagency Vietnam Coordinating Committee William H. Sullivan, as well as Taylor, Admiral Felt, and General William C. Westmoreland, the new Commander of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the conference clarified little concerning bombing policy. The discussion of North Vietnam "was limited to assessments of the DRV's military capabilities, particularly its air defenses, and their implications for the feasibility of an air attack. Policy aspects of air operations against the North were not mentioned."³⁶

The conferees did not discuss the political goals of a projected air campaign because they could not agree on the objectives of such an effort; the campaign finally began in March 1965 because a majority perceived that bombing would help secure what each individually felt was the unique ingredient necessary for an independent, stable, non-Communist South Vietnam. The President was a part of that majority, and, like his advisors, had personal aims that he sought through bombing. He refused to order the campaign until both he and his advisors had faith in its success.

³⁵Ibid., p. 179.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 172-73.

At the time of the Honolulu Conference, most of the President's principal counselors thought that the bombing advocated by the Joint Chiefs was unnecessary to preserve South Vietnam. Despite the US Intelligence Board's contention in late May 1964 that "the major sources of communist strength in South Vietnam are indigenous," the advisors believed that the Viet Cong lacked the capacity to overthrow the South Vietnamese government without Northern support. "The Viet Cong standing alone did not have the capability of seizing South Vietnam--under no circumstances," commented Rusk. Walt W. Rostow, Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Council in 1964, noted that "North Vietnam controlled the VC [Viet Cong]. We never had any worry about the political power of the Communists in the South." Even Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, who emerged as the administration's chief critic of a bombing campaign, acknowledged that the North directed the insurgency. In a 5 October memorandum, he observed that an air effort against North Vietnam would cast the United States as "a great power raining destruction on a small power because we accused that small power of instigating what much of the world would quite wrongly regard as an indigenous rebellion."³⁷

While realizing that the North Vietnamese had increased support to the Viet Cong, Johnson's top advisors did not think that the situation in June 1964 merited continuous bombing.³⁸ McNamara and Rusk noted Lodge's suggestion that attacking the North would "bolster [Southern] morale and give the population in the South a feeling of unity."³⁹ They did not, however, wish to begin raids irrespective of the

³⁷Oral History Interview of William Bundy by Paige E. Mulhollan, 26 May 1969, Tape 1, Johnson Library, p. 23; SNIE 50-2-64, 25 May 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 125; Rusk interview, 15 July 1985; Rostow interview, 23 May 1986; George W. Ball, "How Valid Are the Assumptions underlying our Viet-Nam Policies?" 5 October 1964, The Atlantic 230 (July 1972), p. 46, emphasis added.

³⁸Lewy, p. 29; William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 1, p. 23. The first regular North Vietnamese infantry regiment did not depart North Vietnam for the South until September or October 1964. See Lewy, pp. 39-40.

³⁹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 173.

political and military situation in the South. The Khanh government had not demonstrated true stability and continued to lose territory to the Viet Cong. If the military situation dictated the need for air power, both Secretaries preferred to apply it against the backdrop of a strong Southern regime. McNamara supported Taylor's recommendation for "demonstrative strikes" against limited military targets should the North continue increasing insurgent support.⁴⁰ On 15 June, the President concurred with his advisors' proposal to restrict American military actions unless the Communists resorted to "drastic measures."⁴¹

North Vietnam's alleged attacks in early August on American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin,⁴² followed by the near-collapse of the Khanh government later that month, changed the war's complexion for those charged with directing United States interests in South Vietnam. The Tonkin Gulf incident provided Johnson with the opportunity to request a Congressional resolution that would demonstrate the American government's firm resolve to oppose Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. The President thought that public backing was essential before applying large doses of military pressure against Hanoi.⁴³ Despite Congress' sweeping endorsement of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, however, he refused to begin continuous bombing of the North. His civilian advisors--who supported his decision to retaliate with five airstrikes--did not think that the time was ripe for a sustained air campaign.

New Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor believed that the United States would eventually have to begin continuous bombing to induce Hanoi "to cease its efforts to take over the south by subversive warfare." Johnson had given Taylor "overall responsibility . . . [for] the whole military effort in South Vietnam," and the

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴²While the North Vietnamese apparently attacked the destroyer Maddox on the morning of 1 August, considerable doubt remains whether they attacked the Maddox and the C. Turner Joy on 4 August. See Herring, pp. 119-22.

⁴³Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 180.

former general provided the State Department with a detailed description of his views on 18 August. Taylor argued against beginning an air campaign before the Saigon government achieved greater stability. He did not foresee a sturdy Southern regime prior to his "target D-Day" of 1 January 1965. Until then, he asserted that "we should be developing a posture of maximum readiness for a deliberate escalation of pressure against North Vietnam." Assuming that Khanh solidified his position and Hanoi continued to support the Viet Cong, "a carefully orchestrated bombing attack on North Vietnam, directed primarily at infiltration and other military targets," should begin with the new year. Prior to 1 January, the United States should attack across the border in Laos to stem the supply flow to the Viet Cong. Taylor acknowledged that he had not carved his ideas in stone. "We must always recognize . . . that events may force [the] US to advance D-Day to a considerably earlier date," he remarked.⁴⁴

State Department officials Rusk and William Bundy searched for means both to improve Southern morale and to pressure the North. A clash involving Catholics, Buddhists, and Viet Cong resulted in anarchy in Saigon by mid-August. Because of the chaos, the State Department focused on restoring the Southern government before initiating "serious systematic pressures" against North Vietnam. "The hope . . . through '64 was that if you had to act you'd be able to act in support of a government that had shown it had a degree of legitimacy and a mandate," Bundy reflected.⁴⁵ Like Taylor, Bundy and Rusk thought that a continuous air campaign against the North could not begin before 1 January 1965.

In a cable to the new ambassador, they suggested conducting covert air and naval operations to "foreshadow" continual pressures. The two asserted that the Communist response to such clandestine actions might trigger an air campaign, as

⁴⁴Letter, Lyndon Johnson to Maxwell Taylor, n. d., Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 79; Cable, Taylor to State Department, 18 August 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 545-48.

⁴⁵William Bundy interview, 29 May 1969, Tape 2, pp. 1-2.

might "deterioration in South Vietnam's situation." Yet they believed that covert operations would accomplish the Department's objectives at the "lowest level of risk." The risk that most concerned the two was the threat of Chinese intervention, and they noted that Viet Cong aggression stemmed from the combined actions of Hanoi and Peking.⁴⁶ The fear of Chinese involvement played a large role in determining how the State Department leaders perceived the utility of an air campaign.

Rostow examined the efficacy of potential air strikes from a different perspective. An Eighth Air Force staff officer who helped select targets during World War II, Rostow had taught American history at Oxford after the war. There he befriended Ernest Swinton, the inventor of the tank who had developed a theory of strategic bombing similar to that produced by the Air Corps Tactical School.⁴⁷ Swinton argued that attacks on key elements of an enemy's economy (such as a pile driver in the building of a bridge) would render enemy armies incapable of fighting. Rostow tried to apply Swinton's theory to Vietnam. In late August 1964, he contended that an escalating air effort against essential components of North Vietnam's economic and military structure would convince Hanoi to stop supporting the insurgency. North Vietnamese leaders would see such a campaign, he maintained, as leading to the destruction of the North's national fabric and the loss of autonomy to China.⁴⁸

McNamara's office contested the logic of the "Rostow thesis." Defense analysts argued that Rostow's approach could succeed only if the United States convinced North Vietnam of its serious intent to preserve the Southern government. Unless Hanoi understood that (1) the United States sought a limited goal through limited action; (2) its commitment to that goal was total; and (3) a public consensus backed the policy, the analysts did not believe that Rostow's plan could bear fruit. In particular,

⁴⁶Cable, State Department to Taylor, 14 August 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 333-37.

⁴⁷Rostow interview, 23 May 1986.

⁴⁸Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 109-110.

they questioned the administration's ability to "legitimize" the raids to the American public. "The likelihood and political costs of failure of the approach, and the pressures for US escalation if the early moves should fail, require serious examination," they concluded.⁴⁹

McNamara agreed that rapidly initiating an air campaign might produce unforeseen consequences. On 24 August, the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Army General Earle G. Wheeler, recommended a "sudden, sharp blow" as the most effective means "to bring home . . . the intent of the US to bring about cessation of the DRV's support of insurgency in the South." Wheeler presented McNamara with a revised list of 94 targets and proposed a 16-day aerial assault against all sites. Despite directing the JCS to plan for raids to follow the 16-day effort, McNamara refused to advocate the initial proposal unless Hanoi provided "suitable provocation." He preferred instead to follow the "Plan of Action," developed by Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA) John T. McNaughton. McNaughton's design aimed "to create as little risk as possible of the kind of military action which would be difficult to justify to the American public and to preserve where possible the option to have no US military action at all." Like the Joint Chiefs, McNamara sought to eliminate the North's direction of and support to the Southern insurgency. Yet in the absence of more severe efforts by Hanoi, he was reluctant at the end of August 1964 to promote the application of air power to achieve his goal.⁵⁰

The President also had doubts that the time was ripe to initiate an air campaign. On 7 September, he met with his top military and civilian advisors to discuss the crisis in Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs recommended that the United States provoke Hanoi into taking actions that would allow retaliation through the 94-target scheme.

⁴⁹Penta. A Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 109-110; 201-02. Original emphasis.

⁵⁰JCSM-729-64, 24 August 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 143; Memorandum, McNamara to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 31 August 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 333-36; John T. McNaughton, "Plan of Action for South Vietnam," 3 September 1964 (Second Draft), Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 337.

Rusk disagreed, arguing for an examination of all means of persuasion short of bombing. Both Taylor and McCone considered an air campaign against the North dangerous because of the Saigon regime's weakness. McNamara too felt that Southern instability obviated an air effort, but suggested that bombing should begin if the Communists widened the war. Johnson was skeptical of bombing's ability to improve the situation and scribbled "Can we really strengthen the government of South Vietnam?" on a note pad. He announced that he "did not wish to enter the patient in a 10-round bout, when he was in no shape to hold out for one round. We should get him ready for three or four rounds at least."⁵¹

The President refused to sanction the JCS plan, although he approved covert naval operations in the Tonkin Gulf and made provisions to initiate limited air strikes in Laos. He also approved future retaliatory air raids against North Vietnam. "We should be prepared," he ordered in NSAM 314, "to respond on a tit-for-tat basis against the DRV in the event of any attack on US units or any special DRV/VC action against South Vietnam. The response for an attack on US units should be along the lines of the Gulf of Tonkin attacks, against specific and related targets. The response for special action against South Vietnam should likewise be aimed at specific and comparable targets."⁵²

While refusing to condone a campaign against the North, Johnson planted the seed for air strikes that he could expand into a continuous effort. The justification for such raids no longer had to be North Vietnamese actions against Americans; Viet Cong attacks on South Vietnamese now sufficed as a pretext for United States retaliation. Still, the President refused to take any immediate, overt military action to preserve the Saigon government. Johnson "knew [that] the situation [in South Vietnam] wasn't

⁵¹ Johnson Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 110, 143, 193-4, 204; McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum for Record," 14 September 1964, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1.

⁵² McGeorge Bundy, "Memorandum for Record," 14 September 1964.

good," recalled William Bundy. "He knew that it could be on his plate right after the election, but he was hoping that it would right itself."⁵³ The prospects of an improvement were dim. Although the turmoil in Saigon produced a triumvirate of Khanh, Duong Van Minh, and Tran Thien Khiem by the end of August, the group never assumed power. Khanh continued as de facto Prime Minister and rumors of coups persisted.

RATIONALE FOR AN AIR CAMPAIGN, FALL 1964

Gradually, during late September and early October, a feeling emerged among the President's top advisors that the United States would have to subject North Vietnam to an air campaign.⁵⁴ This perception was more a mood than a belief, resulting from frustration more than conviction. No consensus had developed that bombing was the answer to the Vietnam problem; advisors continued to pursue individualistic goals that each felt would lead to a stable Southern regime. The worsening situation caused them to consider alternatives other than diplomatic initiatives, advisory support, and covert operations to accomplish their objectives. In reviewing options, their thoughts turned to air power—a means of applying military force with minimal American personnel, a means envisioned in NSAM 283, and a means already applied at the Tonkin Gulf. While Rusk advised against beginning an air effort for the remainder of 1964, he contended that Johnson should not seek a settlement in Vietnam until after having both hurt the North and convinced the South of his resolve. McNamara and McNaughton concurred that the President should avoid negotiations until he had damaged North Vietnam.⁵⁵ By 3 October, Ball saw the fundamental questions regarding an air campaign as: "Should we move toward escalation because of

⁵³William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 1, p. 33.

⁵⁴Herbert Y. Schandler, The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 6.

⁵⁵Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3:204-05.

the weakness of the governmental base in Saigon in hope that escalation will tend to restore strength to that base; or can we risk escalation without a secure base and run the risk that our position may at any time be undermined?"⁵⁶

The 1 November Viet Cong attack on the American air base at Bien Hoa dashed Johnson's hopes that tensions would subside in South Vietnam. Despite NSAM 314's provision for retaliatory air strikes, and pleas from both Taylor and the Joint Chiefs, the President ordered no military response. Johnson, Rusk, and McNamara feared that a display of force might trigger Chinese involvement, and the President had one eye on the election only days away. His civilian advisors also questioned the appropriateness of another retaliatory raid. "A great many of us felt that the one-shot thing, after you did it a couple of times, conveyed to Hanoi the idea of weakness," William Bundy remembered. "[We felt] that it was far from being useful--if anything, it tended to play itself out very quickly."⁵⁷

Johnson responded to Bien Hoa by organizing a National Security Council (NSC) "Working Group" to analyze alternatives open to the United States in Vietnam. William Bundy chaired the committee, which included representatives from the Departments of State and Defense, the Joint Chiefs, and the CIA. The Working Group was to present its findings to principal NSC members, who would in turn recommend actions to the President. The representatives took three weeks to reach a conclusion.

The group developed three plans of action, labeled Options A, B, and C. Two featured a sustained air effort against North Vietnam. Option A was a continuation of current activity, to include prompt reprisals for major Viet Cong attacks. Option B was a heavy air assault that would continue until Hanoi agreed to quit supporting the insurgency. Option C combined current activities with a milder air campaign that would stop once negotiations began. A negotiated settlement ending Hanoi's support to

⁵⁶Ball, "How Valid," pp. 37-8.

⁵⁷William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 2, pp. 2-6; 23: Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3:209.

the Viet Cong was the announced goal of all options, and the lack of American bargaining points caused many representatives to advocate bombing to gain negotiating leverage. Yet not all were certain that an air campaign would deter Hanoi.

In a 17 November memorandum, Bundy noted:

We have many indications that the Hanoi leadership is acutely and nervously aware of the extent to which North Vietnam's transportation system and industrial plan is vulnerable to attack. On the other hand, North Vietnam's economy is overwhelmingly agriculture [sic] and, to a large extent, decentralized. . . . Interdiction of imports and extensive destruction of transportation facilities and industrial plants would cripple DRV industry. These actions would also seriously restrict DRV military capabilities, and would degrade, though to a lesser extent, Hanoi's capabilities to support guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam and Laos. . . . We do not believe that attacks on industrial targets would so greatly exacerbate current economic difficulties as to create unmanageable control problems. . . . DRV leaders . . . would probably be willing to suffer some damage to the country in the course of a test of wills with the US over the course of events in South Vietnam.⁵⁸

Some group members observed that implementing Option B would cause the United States to demand "unconditional surrender" from Hanoi.⁵⁹ The option specified that air strikes would stop only when the North Vietnamese demonstrated that they had quit supporting the insurgencies in Laos and Vietnam. By insisting that compliance include an end to both Viet Cong terrorism and the resistance of pacification efforts, the alternative required Hanoi to renounce its basic goal of unifying Vietnam. An intensive air campaign might also heighten the risk of war with the Communist superpowers. Vice Admiral Lloyd Mustin, the JCS representative, discounted the possibility of Chinese or Soviet intervention. "To achieve . . . [our] objective . . . to cause the DRV to terminate support of the Southeast Asia insurgencies . . . does not necessarily require that we 'defeat North Viet-Nam,'" he asserted, "and it certainly does not require that we defeat Communist China. Hence our commitment to SVN [South Vietnam] does not involve a high probability, let alone 'high risk,' of a major conflict in Southeast

⁵⁸NSC Working Group Draft Memorandum, 17 November 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 215.

⁵⁹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 226.

Asia.⁶⁰ Robert Johnson of the State Department's Policy Planning Council added another consideration: "The threat [of an air assault] may be as important as execution . . . in producing desired Communist reactions," he surmised.⁶¹

Despite Mustin's efforts to win approval for Option B, the Working Group suggested Option C to the NSC principals on 21 November. The representatives saw little likelihood that Option A could compel an accord. While viewing Option B as having "a greater chance than either of the other two of obtaining our objectives vis-a-vis Hanoi," they rejected it because of possible Chinese intervention. Under C, the group thought "at best . . . the DRV might feign compliance and settle for an opportunity to subvert the South another day." More likely was the possibility that South Vietnam's internal situation would not improve, which would force "the difficult decision whether to escalate on up to major conflict with China."⁶²

Option C was attractive, however, because it was controllable. An announced willingness to negotiate made the program more appealing than Option B to a majority of group members. Bundy believed that a bombing campaign's objective should be the revival of South Vietnamese morale,⁶³ a goal supported by any air effort regardless of intensity. McNaughton viewed bombing as a substitute for strengthening the Saigon government. He expected a continued decline in the competency of the Southern regime, but thought that air power might cause Hanoi to stem its support to the Viet Cong. "A less active VC can be handled by a less efficient GVN [Government of (South) Vietnam]," he reasoned. Should Option C fail, McNaughton felt it "would leave behind a

⁶⁰JCS Draft Memorandum, 8 November 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3:218.

⁶¹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3:226.

⁶²William P. Bundy and John T. McNaughton, "Courses of Action in Southeast Asia," 21 November 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3:663;665.

⁶³William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 2, p. 6.

better odor than Option A" by showing that the United States was "willing to keep promises, be tough, take risks, get bloodied, and hurt the enemy badly."⁶⁴

The NSC principals considered the Working Group's conclusions during the last week of November 1964. They disagreed over whether Option B or C created the greater risk of Communist superpower intervention, with Wheeler and McCone arguing that B provided less risk while McNamara and Rusk maintained the opposite. Taylor joined the group on 27 November and proposed a combination of Options A and C. In contrast to his August recommendations, he suggested initiating an air campaign to help stabilize the Southern government as well as to stop Hanoi's support of the Viet Cong. To stem "the mounting feeling of war weariness and hopelessness which pervade [sic] South Vietnam," the ambassador recommended intensified covert operations, reprisal bombings, and attacks on supply trails in Laos. Following these measures, the United States would "begin to escalate progressively by attacking appropriate targets in North Vietnam." Justifying the raids on the need to reduce infiltration would allow strikes on such targets as staging areas, training facilities, and communication centers. "The tempo and weight of the attacks could be varied according to the effects sought," Taylor asserted. "In its final form, this kind of attack could extend to the destruction of all important fixed targets in North Vietnam and to the interdiction of movement on all lines of communication." He advised the principals not to negotiate until North Vietnam was "hurting," and not to permit the North to win unless it "paid a disproportionate price."⁶⁵

Taylor's remarks had a profound effect on the NSC leaders. On 1 December, they recommended to Johnson a two-phased plan mirroring the ambassador's suggestion. Phase I was a 30-day extension of current activity supplemented by

⁶⁴John T. McNaughton, "Action for South Vietnam," 7 November 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 602, 604.

⁶⁵Text of Briefing by Maxwell Taylor, 27 November 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 666-72.

reprisals and raids in Laos; Phase II, an air campaign against the North of gradually increasing intensity, would begin once the Saigon government showed signs of durability. No negotiations would occur during the first phase. During the second, the United States would demand that Hanoi both stop infiltration and "bring about a cessation of VC armed insurgency."⁶⁶

The President approved Phase I on 1 December but refused to sanction additional action. He also declined to make William Bundy's outline of the two-phased concept a new NSAM. "Most essential [to bombing the North] is a stable [Southern] government," Johnson told his advisors. "[There is] no point in hitting the North if the South [is] not together." He informed Taylor that the South Vietnamese must meet "minimum criteria of performance . . . before any new measures against North Vietnam would be either justified or practicable." These prerequisites included a government capable of speaking for its populace and of maintaining law and order in its cities. The President directed his ambassador to make the requirements clear to the South's leaders.⁶⁷

FROM CONTEMPLATION TO REALITY, WINTER 1964-65

In mid-December, the Saigon government's shaky foundations crumbled further. Supported by high-ranking generals, Khanh attempted to remove the titular head of state, civilian Premier Tran Van Huong. The turmoil prevented Johnson from responding when the Viet Cong bombed a Saigon hotel on 24 December and killed two Americans. The generals pledged to support Huong on 9 January, but on the 27th they succeeded in removing him from office. Rioting had begun on the 19th in response to increased draft calls. The President remained adamant that he would not start Phase II

⁶⁶Taylor briefing text, Annex I, 27 November 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 673.

⁶⁷McGeorge Bundy, "Cabinet Room Meeting Notes," 1 December 1964, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1; Draft Instructions, Johnson to Taylor, 2 December 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 91.

until the South Vietnamese made a concerted effort to obtain stability. He cabled Taylor that he would consider retaliatory air strikes, provided they could be conducted jointly by American and South Vietnamese pilots within 24 hours of a Viet Cong provocation. These raids would not begin, however, before evacuating American dependents to prevent their future targeting by the Viet Cong. The decision to begin Phase II--assuming a stabilized Saigon government--would "be affected by [American and South Vietnamese] performance in earlier activities."⁶⁸ One of those activities was Operation Barrel Roll, the Air Force's armed reconnaissance of supply trails in Laos. The effort had begun on 14 December as a part of Phase I.

The deteriorating situation in South Vietnam caused Johnson to dispatch McNaughton and McGeorge Bundy on a fact-finding mission to Saigon in early February. While they were there, the Viet Cong attacked the American air base at Pleiku. The raid strengthened the two's conviction that the United States had to retaliate with air power against North Vietnam. On 6 February, the day before the Pleiku attack, they had drafted a memorandum advocating a "graduated reprisal program" of air strikes. After learning of the Viet Cong foray, they advised an individual air raid as "a clear-cut reprisal for a specific atrocity." Thereafter, "reprisal actions would become less and less related to specific VC spectacles and more and more related to a catalogue of VC outrages in SVN." McNaughton and Bundy doubted that air power would quickly end the insurgency, but maintained that the situation demanded an urgent display of American resolve. They declared: "The judgment is that a regular program [of air strikes] will probably dampen VC activities in due course and

⁶⁸Message, Johnson to Taylor, 7 January 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 40.

will probably inspire the South Vietnamese to more effective efforts. The belief is widespread among the South Vietnamese that the US is on the verge of bugging out."⁶⁹

In a memorandum composed on the return flight to Washington, Bundy elaborated on the need for American firmness. He insisted that without "new US action" defeat in Vietnam was inevitable. "There is one grave weakness in our posture in Vietnam which is within our own power to fix," Bundy proclaimed, "and that is a widespread belief that we do not have the will and force and patience and determination to take the necessary action and stay the course." Air power offered the means to change that perception. While a goal of sustained bombing would be to persuade Hanoi to abandon the insurgency, this was "an important but longer-range purpose." Bundy asserted that "the immediate and critical targets are in the South--in the minds of the South Vietnamese and in the minds of the Viet Cong cadres." The United States would not attempt to win an air war over North Vietnam, and the destruction of Communist air defenses would "in no sense represent any intent to wage offensive war against the North." Such attacks would aim only to guarantee the reprisal policy's effectiveness. Bundy contended that the distinctions between conducting an air war against North Vietnam and attempting to execute a reprisal policy "should not be difficult to develop." He further believed that the Saigon government was strong enough to permit a joint air campaign.⁷⁰

Shortly after learning of Pleiku, Johnson decided to launch retaliatory air strikes. In an NSC meeting on the evening of 6 February, the President announced that American and South Vietnamese aircraft would, with Saigon's concurrence, attack four targets in the southern part of North Vietnam. He also ordered the evacuation of

⁶⁹Message, McNaughton to McNamara and Vance, 7 February 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 40. Emphasis added. The message, sent at 1300 Saigon time, contained a notation to guarantee delivery prior to the 0800 NSC meeting on the 7th. Thirteen hours separated Washington and Saigon.

⁷⁰McGeorge Bundy, "A Policy of Sustained Reprisal," 7 February 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 309-315.

American dependents. The raids occurred on 8 and 9 February under the code-name "Flaming Dart." "I thought that perhaps a sudden and effective air strike would convince the leaders in Hanoi that we were serious in our purpose and also that the North could not count on continued immunity if they persisted in aggression in the South," Johnson later asserted. He did not think that the limited assault would trigger Soviet or Chinese intervention. Despite the presence of Soviet Premier Alexsei Kossygin in Hanoi, the President believed that the time had come to demonstrate American resolve to the North Vietnamese. When William Bundy questioned the possibility of negotiations, Johnson dismissed the suggestion. "I just don't think you can stand still and take this kind of thing," he retorted.⁷¹

To the President's civilian advisors, Flaming Dart was the signal for a sustained bombing of the North. "I think that most of us assumed that this was bound to mean . . . that we had to set it [bombing] up as a policy and do it," Bundy remembered. Taylor cabled Johnson and expressed his satisfaction over what he thought was the decision to begin Phase II operations. When the Viet Cong killed 23 Americans in an attack on Qui Nhon two days after Flaming Dart, the President again ordered air strikes on the North. Yet he did not bill "Flaming Dart II" as a specific response to a particular insurgent assault. The rationale for the air raids was "continued acts of aggression" by the Viet Cong, and the White House released a long list of Viet Cong incidents occurring since 8 February. A joint US-South Vietnamese statement from Saigon further revealed the permanent nature of the 11 February air strikes by terming them "air operations" rather than "retaliatory" raids.⁷²

⁷¹"Summary Notes of the 345th NSC Meeting," 6 February 1965, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1, p. 2; Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 125; William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 2, p. 12.

⁷²William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 2, p. 14; Memorandum, Taylor to the President, 10 February 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 4C; Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 306.

Johnson officially ordered the sustained air campaign known as "Rolling Thunder" on 13 February. His directive meshed well with the desires of his civilian counselors. The Southern government's inability to maintain civil order or stem the tide of Viet Cong aggression--matched by Hanoi's increasing support for the insurgents⁷³--had caused the momentum for continuous bombing to accelerate since the fall of 1964. The advisors still could not agree, however, on the goals of an air effort. Nor did their individual perceptions of goals remain constant. On 12 February, Taylor advocated an air campaign to break the North Vietnamese will to support the insurgency. He called for "a slow but inexorable barrage of air attacks advancing to the north, capable of convincing the Hanoi government that everything in the Hanoi area was going to be destroyed unless the leaders mended their ways." Taylor now considered boosting South Vietnamese morale a secondary objective, observing that attacks aimed at Northern will would spur Southern morale. A third goal was to limit North Vietnam's physical capability to support the Viet Cong. He suggested a "graduated" air effort at the start to gauge the reactions of Peking and Moscow; if they did not respond, he recommended an intensive assault.⁷⁴

In contrast to Taylor, State Department officials William Bundy and Rusk doubted that sustained bombing would deter Hanoi. Bundy wrote that an air campaign would have "some faint hope" of improving the situation in South Vietnam, but that it would "put us in a much stronger position to hold the next line of defense, namely Thailand." Rusk noted that Asian countries such as Thailand, Taiwan, Australia, and the Philippines had a great stake in the security of Southeast Asia. The United States could not negotiate an accord, he believed, until it achieved bargaining leverage. Bombing

⁷³By mid-February, the North Vietnamese had deployed three regiments of their regular army to South Vietnam; US intelligence sources estimated they had 3800 regular troops in the South by 1 March 1965. See Levy, pp. 39-40.

⁷⁴Oral History Interview of Maxwell Taylor by Ted Gittinger, Washington, DC, 14 September 1981, Johnson Library, Tape 3, pp. 7-8; Cable, Taylor to the President, 12 February 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 315-17.

provided a means to secure that control. "Almost every postwar negotiation . . . has been preceded by some private indication behind the scenes that such a negotiation might be possible. That is missing here--that is missing here." Rusk commented in late February.⁷⁵

To McGeorge Bundy and McNaughton, bombing would demonstrate American resolve. As noted in his 7 February memorandum, Bundy thought that air power could provide the lift needed to sustain the South Vietnamese war effort. He also contended that bombing was a "cheap" method of showing the American commitment. McNaughton believed that an air effort would exhibit the United States' willingness to defend its allies in Southeast Asia. Just before his February trip to Saigon, he pointed out that air strikes would not help South Vietnam much but would have a positive overall effect on America's desire to contain China. McNaughton maintained this perception in early March. He proclaimed that a "progressive squeeze" of North Vietnam would demonstrate "the lengths to which [the] US will go to fulfill commitments," although he did not feel that bombing would improve the situation in South Vietnam or the American bargaining position.⁷⁶

McNamara's view of bombing resembled Taylor's. The Secretary argued that failure to retaliate after Pleiku would mislead the North Vietnamese, and he described the purpose of the Flaming Dart attacks as "to communicate our political resolve." The President aimed that message, McNamara insisted, at Hanoi rather than Saigon. The Secretary saw no point in bombing to destroy the North's capability to support the insurgency because he did not think that air power could accomplish that goal. Instead,

⁷⁵William Bundy, "Memorandum to the Secretary," 6 January 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 684; "National Security Council Meeting," 18 February 1965, National Security Files, NSC Meeting Files, Vols. 1-3, Johnson Library, Box 1; Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 331.

⁷⁶McGeorge Bundy, "A Policy of Sustained Reprisal," p. 312; John T. McNaughton, "Observations Re South Vietnam after Khanh's Re-Coup," 27 January 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 686-87; McNaughton, "Action for South Vietnam," 10 March 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 2, Johnson Library, Box 40.

he asserted that "we should try to destroy the will of the DRV to continue their political interference and guerrilla activity. We should try to induce them to get out of the war without having their country destroyed and to realize that if they do not get out, their country will be destroyed."⁷⁷

The clamor from Johnson's advisors guaranteed that he would have no dearth of reasons for bombing the North. Besides hearing civilian voices, the President noted the echo from the Joint Chiefs, who continued to recommend their 94-target plan as the best means to eliminate Hanoi's support of the insurgency. The multiple arguments combined with Johnson's negative objectives to prevent him from focusing Rolling Thunder on a single goal. He had intended to use air power to demonstrate American resolve to Hanoi in hopes that the North Vietnamese would shrink before a display of United States military prowess. He had not wished to begin an air campaign without a secure Southern government. Yet to avoid South Vietnam's fall, some action was essential, and Rolling Thunder appeared as a logical step after Flaming Dart. Johnson remarked on 17 February that air strikes might have the effect "of helping to stabilize the government in South Vietnam."⁷⁸ He further believed that "if air strikes could destroy enemy supplies and impede the flow of men and weapons coming South, our actions would help save American and South Vietnamese lives."⁷⁹

At the same time, the President remained unconvinced that an air campaign could satisfy his negative political goals. While most American newspapers supported

⁷⁷William E. Simons, "The Vietnam Intervention, 1964-65," in Alexander L. George, David K. Hall, and William E. Simons, The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: Laos, Cuba, and Vietnam (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1971), p. 163; Memorandum, McNamara to the Chairman, JCS, 17 February 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 333; "Memorandum of Meeting with the President," 17 February 1965, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1, p. 2.

⁷⁸"Memorandum of Meeting with the President," 17 February 1965, p. 9. Johnson later commented regarding the decision to begin Rolling Thunder: "I now concluded that political life in the South would collapse unless the people there knew that the North was paying a price in its own territory for its aggression." See The Vantage Point, p. 132.

⁷⁹Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 132.

Flaming Dart, all did not. Both the St. Louis-Post Dispatch and the New York Times questioned the propriety of the raids.⁸⁰ Telegrams to the White House following Flaming Dart I were 12 to 1 against the operation,⁸¹ and increased bombing could cause the public to focus on Vietnam rather than domestic social reform. Most Western nations backed the attacks, but France and Pakistan displayed "lukewarm" enthusiasm, and many "unaligned" countries condemned them.⁸² The President also had to consider the policy's effect on China and the Soviet Union. Although both presented restrained responses to Flaming Dart,⁸³ he had no assurance that they would tolerate continuous bombing. As a result of these negative considerations, Johnson chose not to announce publicly that the United States had embarked on a new path in Vietnam.

Johnson's uncertainty regarding the merits of an air campaign led him to have second thoughts about launching Rolling Thunder. On 16 February, McGeorge Bundy drafted a memorandum for Taylor outlining Johnson's approval of sustained bombing. Bundy's draft stated that "we have recommended, and the President has concurred in, continuing air and naval action against North Vietnam whenever and wherever necessary." Johnson edited the sentence to read: "We have recommended, and we think that the President will concur in, continuing air and naval action against North Vietnam whenever and wherever necessary." He scrawled, "We presently plan to present this program to our National Security Council tomorrow" for addition after Bundy's description of the campaign's particulars. Johnson also lined out against the North in Bundy's remark, "Careful public statements of the US Government, combined

⁸⁰Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 307.

⁸¹ McGeorge Bundy, "Vietnam--Telegrams from the Public," 9 February 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 40.

⁸²"National Security Council Meeting," 18 February 1965.

⁸³Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 303, 307-08.

with the fact of continuing air action, are expected to make it clear that military action against the North will continue while aggression continues."⁸⁴

The President's action puzzled Bundy, and the National Security Advisor revealed that he was not alone in his misgivings. In a memorandum to Johnson on the 16th, he stated: "I think that some of us . . . have been confusing two questions. One is the firmness of your own decision to order continuing action; the other is the wisdom of a public declaration of that policy by you." He observed that the advisors favoring an air campaign saw its approval as "a major watershed decision." "Precisely because this program represents a major operational change and because we have waited many months to put it in effect," he continued,

there is a deep-seated need for assurance that the decision has in fact been taken. When you were out of the room yesterday, Bob McNamara repeatedly stated that he simply has to know what the policy is so that he can make his military plans and give his military orders. This certainty is equally essential if we are to get the necessary political effects in Saigon. If we limit ourselves to reprisals for spectaculars like Pleiku and Qui Nhon, we leave the initiative in the hands of the Communists, and we can expect no good result.

Thus it seems essential to McNamara--and to me too--that there be an absolutely firm and clear internal decision of the US Government and that this decision be known and understood by enough people to permit its orderly execution.⁸⁵

Bundy thought that the President's desire to avoid "a loud public signal of a major change in policy" made "a lot of sense on a lot of grounds." Announcing the policy shift would, he maintained, compel Hanoi to resist Rolling Thunder to save face. Bundy felt that Rusk could handle any essential public statements, which left "only" the problem of communicating the action to allies. "What we tell them is not likely to

⁸⁴McGeorge Bundy, Draft Memorandum for Maxwell Taylor, 16 February 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 40. Emphasis added.

⁸⁵McGeorge Bundy, Memorandum to the President, "Vietnam Decisions," 16 February 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 40.

stay tightly secret," he acknowledged, "yet I think it is crucial that they not feel left out or uninformed."⁸⁶

Johnson accepted the suggestion to notify allied governments and directed the State Department to produce a "White Paper" rationalizing the increased bombing. On 18 February he informed his Far Eastern ambassadors that the United States and South Vietnam would begin a "joint program of continuing air and naval action against North Viet-Nam." The reason for this action was North Vietnamese aggression against the South. The administration planned to present "to the nations of [the] world and to [the] public [a] documented case against the DRV as aggressor."⁸⁷ The White Paper served as the documented evidence. Published on 27 February, it stressed the material support given to the Viet Cong by Hanoi and belittled the importance of North Vietnamese manpower in the South. The State Department had information on troop infiltration, but CIA chief McCone prevented its public release for fear that it would jeopardize intelligence sources. In addition, different officials produced different segments of the report. "This was one of those damned cases where you put a thing together and nobody looks at it as a whole," William Bundy reflected. "We did a lousy job on the White Paper." Bundy knew from his brother McGeorge of the President's desire not to depict Rolling Thunder as a policy change, and the White Paper reflected a low-keyed approach to the air campaign. "Really, the policy was making itself and, in effect, declaring itself through our actions. And this was what the President wanted," the Assistant Secretary recalled.⁸⁸ While perhaps a "lousy job" from the viewpoint of a State Department bureaucrat, the White Paper admirably accomplished Johnson's intention to minimize Rolling Thunder's distinctiveness. It also demonstrated, to the President's satisfaction, his commitment to an air campaign.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Cable, Johnson to US Ambassadors, 18 February 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 324.

⁸⁸William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 2, pp. 14-17.

Johnson's efforts to begin the campaign further revealed his desire to prevent attention from focusing on the bombing. On 18 February, over a week before the White Paper's publication, he ordered the first Rolling Thunder mission for the 20th. An attempted coup by Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao on the 19th produced chaos in Saigon, and Johnson refused to start bombing until the situation stabilized. At the same time, the British and Soviets proposed a "reactivation" of the 1954 Geneva Conference to resolve the Vietnam crisis. The President had no intention of negotiating a settlement while the Viet Cong held the initiative in the South.⁸⁹ Yet he did not wish to begin Rolling Thunder in light of the joint proposal. The political turmoil in South Vietnam continued until the 23th, when Khanh resigned and left the country as an ambassador-at-large. Phan Huy Quat became the new Premier. Meanwhile, the Soviets failed to respond to British suggestions on the conference's format. Khanh's dismissal, combined with the lack of communication between Moscow and London, allowed Johnson to reschedule the first Rolling Thunder strike for the 26th. A violent spring monsoon then prevented any flying until 2 March. On that day, the operation finally commenced, with US Air Force jets bombing the Xom Bay ammunition depot and South Vietnamese aircraft raiding the Quang Khe naval base.

The first attacks set the pattern for the campaign's initial series of strikes. Designated Rolling Thunder 5 because of scheduling delays, the 2 March raids occurred on that day only; Rolling Thunder 6 did not transpire until 14 March and was a one-day effort against barracks and ammunition depots in the southern part of North Vietnam. Johnson prohibited reattacks on targets and made participation by the South Vietnamese Air Force mandatory. Taylor bemoaned the limited effort. "I fear to date that Rolling Thunder in [North Vietnamese] eyes has been merely a few isolated thunder claps," he cabled the President on 8 March. Urging a campaign of increasing intensity that advanced steadily northward, the ambassador suggested "an agreed

⁸⁹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 272, 329.

program covering several weeks" that would convince Hanoi's leaders of the threat to "their sources of power." "Our objective should be to induce in [the] DRV leadership an attitude favorable to US objectives in as short a time as possible in order to avoid a build-up of international pressures to negotiate," he insisted.⁹⁰

The President responded to Taylor's request--which paralleled a Joint Chiefs' recommendation--by making Rolling Thunder a weekly effort. The American embassy in Moscow reported that the Soviets were unlikely to intervene as long as the United States appeared not to threaten North Vietnam's "existence as a socialist state."⁹¹ Johnson believed too that the State Department's White Paper satisfied the public's need for an explanation of the bombing.⁹² Beginning on 15 March, he selected targets for the week, allowing air commanders to choose the precise time of raids during that span. The President eliminated the requirement to conduct attacks jointly with the South Vietnamese and permitted air commanders to strike alternate targets without specific approval from Washington. The air effort would, he now thought, take 12 weeks to produce results.⁹³ Taylor was to inform Quat that the new measures aimed at persuading Hanoi that the cost of continuing aggression was "becoming unacceptably high." "At the same time," Rusk explained to the ambassador, "Quat should understand [that] we continue to seek no enlargement of the struggle and have carefully selected targets with a view to avoiding undesirable provocation. [A] further objective is to continue to reassure [the South Vietnamese] Government and people [that the United States] will continue to fight by their side."⁹⁴ Air commanders conducted Rolling

⁹⁰Cables from Taylor to the President, 8 March 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 335.

⁹¹Cable, Foy Kohler to Rusk, 2 March 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam July 1965," Vol. 2, Johnson Library, Box 40.

⁹²Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 332.

⁹³"Agenda for (White House) Luncheon," 30 March 1965," National Security Files, Files of McGeorge Bundy, Folder: "Luncheons with the President," Vol. 1, part 1, Johnson Library, Box 19.

⁹⁴Cable, Rusk to Taylor, 15 March 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 339.

Thunder 7 (19-25 March) and 8 (26 March-1 April) in accordance with the new guidelines. Targets remained south of the 20th parallel.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS, SPRING AND SUMMER 1965

By the end of March, some of the President's civilian advisors developed doubts that bombing would yield the desired goals. Johnson had placed two Marine battalions in South Vietnam on 8 March to protect American airfields. McNaughton wondered if the United States could salvage the country "without extreme measures against the DRV" or "without deployment of large numbers of US combat troops." He believed the answer to both questions was "no." The Assistant Secretary of Defense listed "flash point limits, doubts that the DRV will cave," and "doubts that the VC will obey a caving DRV" as reasons why the United States would not conduct "will-breaking" strikes against the North. "French-defeat and [the] Korea syndrome" prevented the President from committing large numbers of combat troops. McGeorge Bundy agreed that the bombing's slow pace was unlikely "to produce a real change in Hanoi's position for some time." He estimated that at best, Rolling Thunder would require an additional two to three months before affecting the war. Moreover, as long as the North Vietnamese continued to score successes in the South, Bundy believed that "even a major step up in our air attacks would probably not cause them to become much more reasonable."⁹⁵

The pessimistic evaluations of Rolling Thunder by McNaughton and Bundy stemmed from Hanoi's failure to submit to a limited air campaign. While professing numerous reasons for the offensive, most advisors felt that Hanoi could not withstand a display of American air power.⁹⁶ "It seemed inconceivable that the lightly armed and

⁹⁵John T. McNaughton, "Plan of Action for South Vietnam," 24 March 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 2, Johnson Library, Box 40; McGeorge Bundy, Draft for 1 April 1965 Meeting with the President, n. d., Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 346.

⁹⁶Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 247.

poorly equipped Communist forces could maintain their momentum against, first, increasing amounts of American assistance to the Vietnamese Army, and, subsequently, American bombing," remarked Chester A. Cooper.⁹⁷ The President's advisors looked to the example of the Cuban missile crisis, where they had coerced an enemy far more powerful than North Vietnam into backing down from an aggressive posture.⁹⁸ Rolling Thunder paralleled the means used to pressure the Soviets. A gradually increasing air campaign threatened North Vietnam's industry much like America's nuclear arsenal had threatened Soviet urban centers. Rolling Thunder also showed resolve while allowing Johnson to exert the level of force that he believed appropriate. Kennedy's firm stand, demonstrated by a naval quarantine that preserved his freedom of action, had brought rapid results. Given the nature of the opponent in Vietnam, many of the President's counselors expected success there as quickly as in October 1962. Yet at the end of March, 1965 Hanoi continued to funnel men and material southward, and South Vietnam's survival remained problematic.

The inability to achieve rapid success with Rolling Thunder caused McGeorge Bundy to suggest an alternative means to gain American objectives. In a 1 April meeting with Johnson, he stressed his conviction that bombing would not soon end the war. Further, attacks near Hanoi "might substantially raise the odds" of Chinese intervention. Bundy asserted that the United States had to take action in the South to stop North Vietnamese aggression. Hanoi would not stop supporting the insurgency, he insisted, until convinced that the Viet Cong could not succeed. Allowing the Marines to begin limited offensive operations would demonstrate America's willingness to fight in the South, although the National Security Advisor believed that the initiative would remain with the Communist forces for several months. The President agreed with the proposal, making it NSAM 328 on 6 April. The directive stated that Rolling Thunder

⁹⁷Cooper, p. 224.

⁹⁸Simons, pp. 147-150.

strikes would focus on lines of communication at "the present slowly increasing tempo." Concurrently, "a change of mission for all Marine Battalions deployed to Vietnam" would "permit their more active use," and two additional battalions would bolster the 3500 Marines already there.⁹⁹

Like the decision to launch Rolling Thunder, Johnson did not want NSAM 328 portrayed as a deviation from previous American efforts in Vietnam. The memorandum concluded with the notation: "The President's desire is that these movements changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy."¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, NSAM 328 announced a key shift in thinking among many of Johnson's civilian advisors. While the air campaign against the North would continue, the directive established--on the ground and in the South--an American combat effort to secure the same goals as Rolling Thunder. The President's counselors would no longer perceive the air campaign as an independent means to success as they had prior to NSAM 328. They viewed it instead as a means to support the expanding combat role of American ground forces, or as a means to inflict pain on the North while the ground troops demonstrated the Communists' inability to win in South Vietnam.

This change in perceptions was a gradual one, however, occurring during the spring and early summer of 1965. Rostow argued in a 1 April study that air attacks against North Vietnam's electric power stations would present Hanoi "with an immediate desperate economic, social, and political problem which could not be evaded."¹⁰¹ McCone believed that NSAM 328 did "not anticipate the type of air operation ... necessary to force the North Vietnamese to reappraise their policy." He elaborated for the President:

⁹⁹NSAM 328, 6 April 1965, National Security Files, National Security Action Memorandums, Johnson Library, Boxes 1-9.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Memorandum by Walt. W. Rostow, 1 April 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 382.

Specifically, I feel that we must conduct our bombing attacks in a manner that will begin to hurt North Vietnam badly enough to cause the Hanoi regime to seek a political way out through negotiation rather than expose their economy to increasingly serious levels of destruction. By limiting our attacks to targets like bridges, military installations, and lines of communication, in effect we signal to the Communists that our determination to win is significantly modified by our fear of widening the war.¹⁰²

Despite these criticisms (which mirrored the thoughts of the Joint Chiefs), Johnson used Rolling Thunder to interdict the highways and railroads south of the 20th parallel throughout April and early May. On 7 April, after a month of continuous bombing, he publicly announced his willingness to negotiate if Hanoi stopped supporting the Viet Cong. The North Vietnamese dismissed the offer. From 13-17 May, the President halted Rolling Thunder, although he did not believe that Hanoi would reply to the pause by negotiating on American terms. The interlude thus provided the rationale for increased military action.¹⁰³ The North Vietnamese did not respond to the pause, and shortly after its conclusion the Viet Cong began heavy attacks on South Vietnamese forces. Devastating several Southern units, the Communist assault was the heaviest to date, and many American observers predicted a South Vietnamese collapse. Yet the President did not significantly increase the scale of Rolling Thunder. He had ordered nine additional battalions to Vietnam in late April, bringing the total United States troop strength to 82,000.¹⁰⁴ As the fighting progressed, Johnson and his advisors saw that the American ground strategy of securing "enclaves" would not suffice to stem the Viet Cong attacks.

¹⁰²John McCone, Letter and Memorandum to the President, 2 April 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 2, Johnson Library, Box 40.

¹⁰³General Andrew Goodpaster to the President, "Meeting with General Eisenhower, 12 May 1965," National Security Files, Name File: President Eisenhower, Johnson Library, Box 3.

¹⁰⁴Lewy, p. 47. Support troops, rather than combat units, composed the largest percentage of this total.

The option to increase bombing remained, and the President's counselors considered it further. On 1 June, Ball cabled Taylor: "We have now reached a point in planning for successive Rolling Thunder operations where we must be clear as to precisely what we are trying to do." He asserted that the United States could follow one of "two possible approaches to the Vietnamese struggle." The "major premise" of the first was that the war must be won in the South; the second maintained that action against the North would contribute to the ultimate decision. Ball argued that the proper conduct of Rolling Thunder hinged on how the President chose to achieve success. If Johnson aimed to win in the South, air strikes in the North "should be regarded as ancillary" to Southern operations. Rolling Thunder should then attempt to boost Southern morale and harass Northern infiltration efforts while avoiding targets near Hanoi and Haiphong that might trigger Chinese or Soviet intervention. If the President aimed to place greater pressure on the North Vietnamese until they halted the insurgency, then "we might logically proceed within the relatively near future" to bomb military installations near Hanoi or Haiphong. "The relevance of all this to the present situation is obvious," Ball concluded. "Action against North Vietnam by US-GVN forces has now reached a critical point."¹⁰⁵

Taylor and his deputy Alexis Johnson did not agree with Ball's sentiments. They replied that "the air campaign in the North and the anti-Viet Cong campaign in the South . . . are two parts of a single coherent program. The air attacks have as their primary objectives the termination of Hanoi's support for the VC whereas the campaign in South Vietnam has as its primary objective the destruction of the Viet Cong military apparatus within the country." They insisted that each campaign complemented the other, as the reduction of infiltration made the ground effort in the South easier while Viet Cong losses "sapped the will of Hanoi." The two disagreed with

¹⁰⁵Cable, Ball to Taylor and Alexis Johnson, 1 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 4, Johnson Library, Box 41.

Ball that American action had reached a "critical point" and commented that quick results in the South would not occur. "A change in DRV attitudes can probably be brought about only when, along with a sense of mounting pain from the bombings, there is also a conviction on their part that the tide has turned or soon will turn against them in the South," they asserted. Taylor and Johnson called for a maximum air campaign that not only inflicted "actual pain" but also heightened "the fear of increased pain." Targets would primarily consist of lines of communication, "varied occasionally" to include military installations within the Hanoi-Haiphong area.¹⁰⁶

As the situation in the South worsened, many of the President's advisors supported increased bombing to raise North Vietnam's level of pain. McGeorge Bundy admitted to the President on 5 June that he was "attracted . . . by the notion of an occasional limited attack inside the Hanoi perimeter."¹⁰⁷ Rusk and McNamara both acknowledged in early June that bombing could help convince Hanoi that it could not win by force.¹⁰⁸ On the 7th, Westmoreland notified Johnson that South Vietnam could not survive the Communist thrust unless the United States deployed 44 combat battalions. Five days later, South Vietnamese officers overthrew the Quat government. Air Force commander Nguyen Cao Ky became the new Premier on the 19th. The President responded by allowing Westmoreland to commit American troops to combat wherever their participation would, in the general's judgment, prevent a collapse of South Vietnamese forces.

McNamara supported Johnson's action and advocated even stronger measures. The Secretary called for both an increase in ground troop strength to

¹⁰⁶Cable, Taylor and Alexis Johnson to Ball, 3 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 4, Johnson Library, Box 41.

¹⁰⁷Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to the President, 5 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 4, Johnson Library, Box 41.

¹⁰⁸Berman, pp. 67-68.

175,000 and an activation of 100,000 Army reservists. He also urged a major increase in Rolling Thunder. "While avoiding . . . population and industrial targets not closely related to the DRV's supply of war material to the VC, we should announce to Hanoi and carry out actions to destroy such supplies and to interdict their flow into and out of NVN," he advised the President on 1 July. McNamara pressed for mining North Vietnamese harbors and for attacks on rail lines to China, POL storage areas, port facilities, power plants, airfields, and surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites. B-52s would accomplish many of the raids. The Secretary quoted a recent CIA study as rationale for his program: "We doubt if the Communists are likely to change their basic strategy in Vietnam unless and until two conditions prevail: (1) They are forced to accept a situation in the South which offers them no prospect of an early victory and no grounds for hope that they can simply outlast the US and (2) North Vietnam itself is under continuing and increasingly damaging punitive attack." Achieving both conditions would, McNamara believed, cause Hanoi to alter its course of action in South Vietnam.¹⁰⁹

The Secretary's proposal was too extreme for many of the President's advisors. McGeorge Bundy contended that it had grave limitations. By suggesting heavy air attacks "when the value of air action we have taken is sharply disputed" and failing to examine "the upper limit of US liability," the program was, he maintained, "rash to the point of folly." Rusk believed that the proposed expansion of Rolling Thunder was "probably broader than necessary." Ball, who prepared an independent analysis of the air effort on 29 June, argued that "the enemy will not be scared into quitting." He thought that increased bombing would only make the North Vietnamese

¹⁰⁹Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 26 June 1965 (Revised 1 July), National Security Files, NSC Meeting File, Vol. 3, Johnson Library, Box 1.

more resolute, and that coolie labor would prevent air power from affecting the Viet Cong's capability to fight.¹¹⁰

Although leaning towards a greater military commitment, the President wanted a firsthand assessment of the situation in South Vietnam before making a formal decision. Johnson dispatched McNamara to Saigon on 14 July; when he returned on the 20th he no longer recommended a surge in Rolling Thunder. Dismayed by the Viet Cong advance, the Secretary now focused almost exclusively on the ground effort in the South. He continued to advocate a 175,000-man American force and called for the President to activate 235,000 reservists. Meanwhile, the air campaign "should increase slowly from the present level of 2500 sorties a month to 4000." McNamara omitted the previous requests for mining and for attacks other than against lines of communication.¹¹¹ The President accepted the suggestion to deploy additional manpower but did not call for the reserves, a move that would, he felt, have caused a greater public awareness of the war. He also agreed to the proposals on Rolling Thunder.

McNamara expounded upon his perception of the air campaign in two memorandums to Johnson at the end of July. On the 28th, the Secretary analyzed what he now considered Rolling Thunder's objectives:

The purposes of the program of bombing North Vietnam are, I think, being achieved. The purposes, in addition to reprisal (as was the case in the Tonkin Gulf and to a lesser extent after the Pleiku bombing), have been, first, to give us a better bargaining counter across the table from the North Vietnamese and, second, to interdict the flow of men and supplies from the North to the South. The evidence is that the program is valuable in both respects. It seems fairly clear that termination of the

¹¹⁰Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to McNamara, 30 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC History, "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 6, Johnson Library, Box 43; State Department Memorandum to McNamara, 30 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 6, Johnson Library, Box 43; Memorandum from Ball to the President, 29 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 6, Johnson Library, Box 43.

¹¹¹Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 20 July 1965, NSF Country File: Vietnam, Folder 2E, Johnson Library, Box 74.

bombing program will be worth a good deal to the other side, and we have every reason to believe that the strikes at infiltration routes have at least put a ceiling on what the North Vietnamese can pour into South Vietnam, thereby putting a ceiling on the size of the war that the enemy can wage there. A side effect of the program has been to convey to both North and South Vietnam in unambiguous terms the US commitment to see this thing through. . . . Neither of the purposes I have mentioned have so far required more extended bombing in North Vietnam. As for the value of the program as a bargaining counter in negotiations, that value depends upon there being, at about the same time, an improvement in our situation in the South; I do not believe that even a greatly extended program of bombing could be expected to produce significant North Vietnamese interest in a negotiated solution until they have been disappointed in their hopes for a quick military success in the South.¹¹²

Two days later, McNamara wrote that "even with hindsight" he felt that the decision to launch Rolling Thunder was wise and that the campaign should proceed. Yet his guidance for continued bombing was vague and contradictory. He remarked that the air effort should provide a "credible threat of future destruction" while "mak[ing] it politically easy for the DRV to enter negotiations." At the same time, "the program should avoid bombing which runs a high risk of escalation with the Soviets or China."¹¹³ The Secretary's disjointed counsel revealed that he had not settled on an overriding goal for Rolling Thunder, nor did he envision a prevailing objective for the campaign.

McNamara's July perception of Rolling Thunder was a template outlining the views of Johnson's principal civilian advisors. These views ranged from Rostow's conviction that attacking targets in Hanoi with all means short of "using nuclear weapons or inflicting indiscriminate civilian casualties" was necessary to compel a settlement, to Ball's belief that increased bombing would ultimately cause a

¹¹²Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 28 July 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 40.

¹¹³Memorandum from McNamara for the President, 30 July 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 388. Original emphasis.

confrontation with China or the Soviet Union.¹¹⁴ Most thought that Rolling Thunder's utility laid somewhere between these two extremes, and by the end of July, virtually all tied the air campaign to the ground effort. As the war continued, their faith in bombing's ability to spur negotiations gradually diminished. Many also came to believe that Rolling Thunder marginally reduced North Vietnam's capacity to infiltrate men and equipment and hence provided minimal assistance to American ground forces. Still, as long as the United States maintained troops in the South, Johnson's advisors had difficulty opposing any measure that supported the ground units.

Although he accepted the bulk of McNamara's July proposals, Johnson had not lost faith in air power. He had, since issuing NSAM 328, lost faith in air power's ability to give him a quick victory. The deteriorating situation in the South slowly consumed his attention, until by the late spring he thought that South Vietnam's survival hinged on the large-scale commitment of ground troops. McNamara's Saigon trip, and the week of discussions following his return, only supported what Johnson had already determined.¹¹⁵ He could not commit the troops all at once, however, for to do so would have revealed--like a dramatic increase in Rolling Thunder--the magnitude of the Vietnam crisis. The President realized that the incremental increase of American forces would prolong the war, although by July few of his advisors believed that the war could be rapidly concluded.¹¹⁶ Until ground troops brought relative stability to South Vietnam, Johnson would see Rolling Thunder primarily as a means to support US Army and Marine infantrymen. That perception of the air campaign was not a

¹¹⁴Rostow letter to Rusk, "Hitting Hanoi Targets," 26 July 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 7, Johnson Library, Box 43; Memorandum from Ball to the President, 29 June 1965.

¹¹⁵Johnson's questions to his advisors during the July deliberations "were not intended to make a difference in option selection. Rather, their purpose was to legitimize a previously selected option by creating the illusion that other views were being considered." See Berman, p. 112. Cooper writes: "It is my belief that the issue of additional deployments was already resolved when the NSC met in late July." See p. 285.

¹¹⁶William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 2, pp. 36-7.

constant one. After American troops helped stall the Communist advance in the autumn of 1965, he thought that Rolling Thunder might tip the scales enough to persuade Hanoi to negotiate a favorable accord. Johnson did not completely give up on the air effort as a means to help secure his positive objective of an independent, stable, non-Communist South Vietnam until March 1968.¹¹⁷ By then, he was unsure that the goal itself was obtainable.

¹¹⁷ Johnson commented in February 1967: "Hanoi is trying to force us to give up the bombing of North Vietnam. We will keep on until we get something from the North Vietnamese." A year later, in response to the Tet Offensive, he approved attacks on 14 targets near the center of Hanoi. See "Summary Notes of the 568th NSC Meeting," 8 February 1967, National Security Files, NSC Meetings, Vol. 4, Johnson Library, Box 2; "Notes of the President's Tuesday Luncheon Meeting," 6 February 1968, President's Appointment File, "February 6, 1968," Johnson Library, Box 89.

CHAPTER III

ROLLING THUNDER: MILITARY OBJECTIVES

The military task confronting us is to make it so expensive for the North Vietnamese that they will stop their aggression against South Viet Nam and Laos. If we make it too expensive for them, they will stop. They don't want to lose everything they have.

Curtis E. LeMay, July 1965¹

Like President Johnson's principal civilian advisors, his air chiefs relied on experience to guide Vietnam planning. In fashioning an air offensive against North Vietnam, they turned to the perceived lessons of World War II strategic bombing. Commanders viewed the "unrestricted" campaigns against Germany and Japan as proper applications of air power. Most believed that similar bombing would have produced a swifter end to the Korean War, and that an air effort free of political controls would favorably resolve the Vietnam conflict. While having some understanding of the President's negative objectives, the air chiefs did not believe that those goals warranted limitations on Rolling Thunder beyond what they would have themselves applied.²

Military planning for Rolling Thunder meshed well with Air Force strategic bombing doctrine. Preparation for the campaign hearkened to the teachings of the Air Corps Tactical School and the development of AWPD-1, the plan guiding the Army Air Forces' bombing of Germany. Air chiefs targeted North Vietnam's economic and military "vital centers," believing that by destroying the North's war-making

¹Curtis E. LeMay with MacKinlay Kantor, Mission with LeMay (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), p. 564. Original emphasis.

²Chief among these "self-imposed" restrictions were prohibitions against terror raids on civilians. Chapter IV discusses this issue more fully.

capability they would also disrupt its social fabric. Yet as Rolling Thunder would demonstrate, the doctrine deemed appropriate for general war with the Soviet Union was ill-suited for a limited conflict with an enemy waging guerrilla war.

AIR COMMANDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF OBJECTIVES

Throughout the war, the Joint Chiefs described American political goals by citing NSAM 288: "The objective in Vietnam . . . is a stable and independent noncommunist government."³ This perception of American war aims among high-ranking officers remained constant during Rolling Thunder's three-year span.⁴ Top-level commanders were further aware of Johnson's desire not to expand the war, although they did not know all the President's motivations for limiting the conflict. The Joint Chiefs observed that a "basic military task" of American forces was "to deter Communist China from direct intervention."⁵ Still, most commanders never considered Chinese or Soviet intervention a serious possibility.⁶ Air Force intelligence units in Southeast Asia monitored activity near North Vietnam's China border and noted that the

³Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum (herein referred to as JCSM) 652-65, 27 August 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, JCS Memorandums, Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 193, p. 1. At the end of May 1967, the Joint Chiefs criticized Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara for suggesting a course of action in Vietnam that was not consistent with NSAM 288's objectives. See The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam, Senator Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Vol. 4: 178-180.

⁴Herbert Y. Schandler, The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 50. See also William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1976), p. 69; and Oral History Interview of General John P. McConnell by Dorothy Pierce McSweeney, Washington, DC, 14, 28 August 1969, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, Tape 1, p. 24.

⁵JCSM 652-25, 27 August 1965, p. 1.

⁶See, for example, Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 4, and USAF Oral History Interview of Lieutenant General Glen W. Martin by Lieutenant Colonel Vaughn H. Gallagher, 6-10 February 1978, Air Force Historical Research Center (herein referred to as AFHRC), Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, File Number K239.0512-982, p. 480. As Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Sharp was the ranking air commander in the Pacific; Martin was Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff from 1965 to 1967.

Chinese seldom expanded their airfields or increased their troop strength.⁷ Few officers were as broad-minded as Air Force Major General Robert N. Ginsburgh, who served as representative to the National Security Council for Army General Earle G. Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "While I personally think we should have done more [bombing] and done it faster," Ginsburgh recalled, "at the same time I'm very conscious that if things hadn't worked out all I could have said was, 'Gee, boss, I'm awful sorry.' But that doesn't help the President very much who still survives in a country in ruins as a result of a Third World War."⁸

Although air leaders at the highest levels possessed a fair knowledge of American objectives in Vietnam, this understanding diminished the more removed an officer was from top command positions. To answer "Why are we fighting?" in April 1965, Commander James B. Stockdale told his pilots simply that "we're here to fight because its in the interest of the United States that we do so."⁹ Air Force Chief of Staff John P. McConnell remarked that most Air Force officers did not understand the reasons for the war's political controls.¹⁰ His deputy, Lieutenant General Glen W. Martin, offered a harsh assessment of why they did not: "There was an obfuscation and a confusion and a lack of understanding, a lack of clarity, and a lack of declaration right from the President on down that really created difficulties and set the stage for not only our mistakes but also our eventual defeat."¹¹ While containing a measure of truth, Martin's evaluation neglected a fundamental factor clouding subordinate air

⁷Interview of Lieutenant Colonel William H. Greenhalgh by the author, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 15 May 1985.

⁸USAF Oral History Interview of Major General Robert N. Ginsburgh, by Colonel John E. Van Duyn and Major Richard B. Clement, 26 May 1971, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-477, p. 25.

⁹Quoted in Sharp, p. 99.

¹⁰US Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, Air War against North Vietnam, 90th Cong., 1st sess., part 3, 22-23 August 1967, p. 201.

¹¹Martin interview, 6-10 February 1978, p. 491.

officers' perceptions of the war. That element was the emphasis that top-level commanders gave to the destructive force of air power. Despite comprehending many of Johnson's limited political objectives, air leaders stressed accomplishing the positive goal through an air campaign suited for total war. As a result, field commanders received directives that simultaneously called for restraint and the destruction of the enemy's capacity to fight.

In defining the objectives of an air campaign against North Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs again turned to NSAM 288. In their 2 June 1964 memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, they described the purpose of a potential air effort as: "to accomplish destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capabilities as necessary to compel the Democratic Government of [North] Vietnam to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos."¹² This statement blended the Joint Chief's perception of the campaign's political objective, "to compel the Democratic Government of Vietnam to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos," with their vision of the military objective to be achieved by air power: destroying North Vietnamese "will and capabilities." Administration officials did not challenge these definitions, and the statement guided the military's view of the air offensive for its duration. Lieutenant General Joseph H. Moore, Commander of the Air Force's 2nd Air Division through mid-1966, described Rolling Thunder's purpose as "to convince the North Vietnamese that it would be too costly for them to continue fighting for South Vietnam."¹³ Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), and the operational director of Rolling Thunder, prefaced his campaign

¹²JCSM 471-64, 2 June 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 172.

¹³Letter from Lieutenant General Joseph H. Moore (Ret.) to the author, 1 October 1986. The 2nd Air Division comprised Air Force fighter units in Southeast Asia. It became 7th Air Force in 1966.

orders with the sentence, "[The] objective is to cause the DRV to cease and desist in its support of the insurgency in Southeast Asia."¹⁴

Sharp's statement of purpose did not reflect a consensus of administration leaders because Johnson's civilian counselors never agreed on a singular objective for Rolling Thunder. The Joint Chiefs developed their definition in the absence of civilian guidance,¹⁵ and it did not always correspond to the aims of the President and his advisors. Top air leaders realized, however, that multiple goals drove Rolling Thunder. McConnell commented in 1967: "The decision to conduct air operations against North Vietnam is directed toward the attainment of three basic aims: First, to reduce and impede the flow of men and supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam; second, to impose a gradually increasing cost on the enemy's campaign of aggression in the south; and third, to convince him that he cannot continue the war of aggression against his neighbor without incurring penalties of still greater severity." He added that "the intent has been to meet our objectives while refraining from the destruction of the North Vietnamese government."¹⁶ Sharp believed in February 1965 that an air campaign would strengthen Saigon's political structure and boost Southern morale.¹⁷ Despite an awareness of Rolling Thunder's multiple aims, air commanders thought that by destroying North Vietnam's capability and will to fight they would achieve all the goals of those advocating an air campaign. In short, air leaders viewed Rolling Thun-

¹⁴One example is Message 227335Z June 1965 from CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT, CINCPACAF, and COMUSMACV, in Commander-in-Chief, PACOM Outgoing Messages, 22 January-28 June 1965, AFHRC, file number K712.1623-2.

¹⁵On 18 November 1964, after the JCS had completed months of detailed planning for an air campaign, Wheeler wrote McNamara: "It is desirable that a clear set of military objectives be agreed upon before further military involvement in Southeast Asia is undertaken." See Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS to the Secretary of Defense, 18 November 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 640.

¹⁶Air War against North Vietnam, 90th Cong., 1st sess., part 3, 22-23 August 1967, p. 201.

¹⁷Message 110735Z February 1965 from CINCPAC to JCS, in Commander-in-Chief, PACOM Outgoing Messages, 22 January-28 June 1965.

der as the means to secure "a stable and independent noncommunist government" in the South.

DESIGNING A CAMPAIGN

In response to the directive in NSAM 288, military chiefs designed a campaign in concert with Air Force doctrine. During the spring and summer of 1964, Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay oversaw the Pentagon planning effort, which received assistance from Pacific Command Headquarters.¹⁸ Convinced that destroying the North's capability to fight would also weaken its will to resist, LeMay's planners devised an offensive aimed at wrecking North Vietnam's key sources of military and economic power. They selected targets on the basis of three criteria: "(a) reducing North Vietnamese support of communist operations in Laos and South Vietnam, (b) limiting North Vietnamese capabilities to take direct action against Laos and South Vietnam, and finally (c) impairing North Vietnam's capacity to continue as an industrially viable state."¹⁹ The planners believed that attacks against supply, ammunition, and POL (Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants) storage sites, plus the armed reconnaissance of highways leading into Laos, would greatly reduce North Vietnamese support to the insurgents. Meanwhile, attacks against airfields, railroad and highway bridges, depots, and POL storage areas in Hanoi and Haiphong would restrict Northern "capability to take direct action." Industrial targets included chemical plants and the nation's only steel mill. By mid-August 1964, LeMay's planners had developed a list of 94 targets, consisting of 82 fixed sites and 12 lines of communication, that they considered the essential components of the North's war-making capacity.²⁰ Through a

¹⁸LeMay remained Air Force Chief of Staff until 1 February 1965, when McConnell became the service head.

¹⁹Quoted in Colonel Dennis M. Drew, Rolling Thunder 1963: Anatomy of a Failure (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1986), p. 29.

²⁰JCS Briefing Text, "Air Operations against North Vietnam and Laos," January 1967, Target Study--North Vietnam, AFHRC, file number K178.2-34.

"severe" application of air power, they estimated that American and South Vietnamese forces could destroy all targets in 16 days.²¹

On 26 August, LeMay recommended immediate attacks on the 94 targets to McNamara. The general noted that "only significantly stronger military pressures" on Hanoi would provide the "relief and psychological boost" needed for governmental stability in the South. He added:

While a US program as discussed above [the 94 target scheme] will not necessarily provide decisive end results, the Joint Chiefs of Staff advocate its adoption and implementation at once. Anything less could be interpreted as a lack of resolve on the part of the United States. The military course of action which offers the best chance of success remains the destruction of the DRV will and capabilities as necessary to compel the DRV to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos.²²

In his memoirs, LeMay remarked that he could bomb the North Vietnamese "back into the Stone Age" by destroying the 94 targets.²³ The plan did not, however, target civilian populations. LeMay's "Stone Age" was exactly what its name implied--the absence of the perceived technological essentials of modern life. Air planners designed the 94 target scheme to destroy North Vietnam's ability to wage modern war. After eliminating that capacity, they believed that Hanoi would have to stop its aggression.²⁴

²¹Air War against North Vietnam, part 3, 22-23 August 1967, p. 212.

²²JCSM 746-64, LeMay to the Secretary of Defense, 26 August 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 551.

²³LeMay with Kantor, p. 565.

²⁴Air planners persisted in this belief despite the Sigma II War Games conducted 8-11 September 1964 by the Joint War Games Agency, Cold War Division of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. According to Under Secretary of State George Ball, the games revealed that destroying the 94 targets "would not cripple Hanoi's capability for increasing its support to the Viet Cong, much less force suspension of present support levels on purely logistical grounds." George W. Ball, "How Valid Are the Assumptions underlying our Viet-Nam Policies?" 5 October 1964, The Atlantic 230 (July 1972), p. 39.

Wheeler agreed with the idea of using air power to destroy North Vietnam's war-making capability,²⁵ and the Joint Chiefs worked throughout the fall of 1964 to implement some form of the 94 target scheme. At a 7 September meeting with Johnson and his principal civilian advisors, Wheeler urged the President to provoke the North Vietnamese into some action that would permit sustained bombing. Johnson turned down the proposal. After the 1 November Viet Cong attack on Bien Hoa, the Joint Chiefs recommended a B-52 strike on Hanoi's Phuc Yen airfield, its primary MiG fighter base. Following the B-52 raid, Air Force and Navy fighters would attack other airfields and the POL storage areas in Hanoi and Haiphong.²⁶

The President's rejection of this advice led to more subdued proposals. On 18 November, in the midst of deliberations by William Bundy's NSC Working Group, the Joint Chiefs suggested a "controlled program of systematically increased military pressures" against North Vietnam in coordination with "appropriate political pressures." Air attacks of increasing intensity would reduce Northern aid to the Viet Cong by killing men and destroying materiel, which would in turn compel Hanoi to divert war resources to homeland defense. Wrecking bridges, staging complexes, and transport, as well as "selected fixed targets" would, the chiefs believed, further limit North Vietnam's capacity to assist the Viet Cong.²⁷

The Joint Chiefs criticized the NSC Working Group's three Vietnam options and provided five alternatives of their own. Option 3, offered in contrast to the Working Group's Option B, called for a controlled program of intense military pressures that would have a major military and psychological impact on the North. If necessary, the

²⁵Wheeler commented in 1967 about Rolling Thunder's origins: "From the start, we have sought to obstruct, reduce, and harass the flow of war-supporting materiel within North Vietnam, and from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, and to destroy the war-supporting facilities of the enemy." See Air War against North Vietnam, part 2, 16 August 1967, p. 126.

²⁶Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 209.

²⁷Memorandum from Wheeler to the Secretary of Defense, 18 November 1964, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 639-40.

attacks' intensity would reach "the full limit of what military actions can contribute toward national objectives," although the early achievement of political goals would end the campaign short of those limits. Option 3 reflected the Joint Chiefs' frustration over their lack of guidance from civilian authorities. It consisted of a gradual air campaign that could begin "without necessarily determining ... to what degree we will commit ourselves to achieve our objectives, or at what point we might stop to negotiate, or what our negotiating objectives might be." The chiefs contended that this alternative paralleled the NSC's Option C, which they denounced because it did not possess "a clear determination to see things through in full."²⁸

Despite the Joint Chiefs' arguments for an intensive air campaign, their representative to the Working Group, Vice Admiral Lloyd Mustin, acknowledged that the air effort did not have to be severe to produce acceptable results. As long as the campaign struck North Vietnam's capability to support the insurgency, he asserted, it might produce a satisfactory effect. "The actual US requirement with respect to the DRV is reduction of the rate of delivery of support to the VC to levels below their minimum necessary sustaining level," Mustin quoted a JCS assessment. "In the present unstable situation something far less than total destruction may be all that is required to accomplish the above. A very modest change in the [South Vietnamese] government's favor ... may be enough to turn the tide and lead to a successful solution." Given the Southern government's uncertain foundations, Mustin--and others among the JCS agencies--thought that "a program of progressively increasing squeeze" might tip the scales sufficiently in Saigon's behalf to overwhelm the Viet Cong.²⁹

Until the Viet Cong's February 1965 attack on Pleiku, the Joint Chiefs received no real indications that Johnson would support a sustained air effort. The

²⁸Quoted in Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 233-34. The other JCS options were: (1) to withdraw from Vietnam; (2) to continue with present policies, and (4) to implement the 18 November JCS proposal.

²⁹Quoted in Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 213-14. Original emphasis.

backing that they then obtained was not for the intensive effort envisioned in the 94-target program. On the day following the Pleiku attack, the President ordered the first Flaming Dart reprisal strike, and McNamara requested plans for an eight-week air campaign against the North. American and South Vietnamese air forces would jointly conduct the operation, which would focus on transportation targets south of the 19th parallel. On 11 February, the Joint Chiefs proposed attacking four fixed targets a week along North Vietnam's Route 7 to "demonstrate to the DRV that continuation of its direction and support of insurgencies will lead to progressively more serious punishment."³⁰ They also called for the deployment of 325 aircraft, including B-52 bombers, to the Western Pacific for use in the offensive. Johnson approved the aircraft transfer, but did not sanction the eight-week program.

On 13 February, the day the President ordered the start of Rolling Thunder, the Joint Chiefs briefed McNamara that the rail lines south of the 10th parallel formed "an attractive, vulnerable, and remunerative target system which would hurt the North Vietnamese psychologically, economically, and militarily." By destroying five bridges, plus the railroad marshalling yard at Vinh, the Joint Chiefs thought that they could "place a stricture" on the North's infiltration of men and equipment.³¹ The Secretary asked them to develop a detailed program for attacking the southern end of the North Vietnamese rail system. In contrast to their advice to attack the six major targets simultaneously, he requested a plan permitting incremental raids on individual targets.

While supporting the February JCS recommendations, McConnell did not think that the suggested programs would severely damage Hanoi's capability to support the insurgency. He proposed a 28-day campaign to destroy all 94 targets on the Joint Chiefs' target list, with strikes beginning in the southern part of North Vietnam and

³⁰Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 11 February 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 320.

³¹Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 13 February 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 340.

moving gradually northward to Hanoi.³² Wheeler, however, backed the rail plan.³³ He believed that three American divisions might deploy to Vietnam, and he wanted to destroy first that portion of the North's war-making capacity that might directly affect a confrontation with American ground forces. Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson also supported the rail plan, which received further encouragement from a proposal by Admiral Sharp.

On 27 February, Sharp suggested beginning an "Eight Week Pressure Program" that would "make it as difficult and as costly as possible for the DRV to support the VC in South Vietnam." Scoffing at intelligence estimates that air power could have only marginal effects on resupply activities, he recommended an unrelenting campaign against 16 targets, consisting of supply depots, barracks, and transportation facilities, south of the 19th parallel. Armed reconnaissance of roads and railroads would supplement the attention on fixed targets. Rather than attempting to persuade Hanoi's leaders that the bombing portended destruction of the North, the effort would demonstrate their inability to back the Viet Cong. "Ho Chi Minh has never doubted ultimate victory," Sharp observed. "To raise such a doubt would be our aim."³⁴

Sharp's proposal affected the Joint Chiefs' planning for a rail campaign and caused McConnell to withdraw his suggestion for a 28-day offensive. The chiefs considered the Air Force representative's proposal, however. In late March, they submitted to McNamara plans for a four-phase, 12-week bombing program that merged their original idea with those of Sharp and McConnell. The chiefs considered that the weekly effort started on 15 March sufficed for the first two weeks of their planned campaign. They limited the initial phase of the remaining ten weeks to interdicting

³²McConnell added 12 extra days to the original plan because of the winter monsoon weather in Vietnam.

³³Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 320.

³⁴Message 271945Z February 1965 from CINCPAC to the JCS, in Commander-in-Chief, PACOM Outgoing Messages, 22 January-28 June 1965.

lines of communication south of the 20th parallel. With this effort, the chiefs sought to "bring home to the [Northern] population the effects of air strikes since consumer goods will be competing with military supplies for limited transport." Interdiction north of the 20th parallel would occur during weeks six through eight to disrupt overland supply routes to China. In week nine, aircraft would bomb port facilities and mine harbors; during week ten, ammunition and supply depots would serve as primary targets. The offensive would conclude with two weeks of strikes against industrial targets outside of populated zones, "leading up to a situation where the enemy must realize that the Hanoi and Haiphong areas will be the next logical targets." McNamara had prohibited raids on targets in urban areas or against North Vietnamese air defenses, and the JCS plan complied with these restrictions. The Joint Chiefs urged the President to begin their plan with phase one on 2 April, although they could not agree on whether Johnson should approve the remainder of the program. As a result, Wheeler notified McNamara that the chiefs were considering alternatives for a subsequent program of air strikes.³⁵

The Secretary of Defense refused to endorse the three-week proposal, but the April Rolling Thunder raids resembled those in the Joint Chiefs' program. Sharp initially believed that the limited interdiction effort would yield dividends. On 4 April he cabled the Joint Chiefs:

The damage inflicted by these attacks on LOCs [lines of communication] and military installations in North Vietnam will cause a diminution of the support being rendered to the Viet Cong. Successful strikes on bridges will degrade the transportation system with an attendant reduction in its capability to transport food and materials from production to shortage areas. Manpower and supplies will undoubtedly have to be diverted toward recovery and rebuilding processes. While the effect may not be felt immediately by the Viet Cong, this increased

³⁵JCSM 221-65, from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 27 March 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 2, Johnson Library, Box 40.

pressure will demonstrate our strength of purpose [and] at the same time make support of the VC as onerous as possible.³⁶

Sharp added that more lucrative targets would appear as the attacks moved northward. Wheeler, however, was uncertain of Rolling Thunder's effectiveness. In an evaluation of all raids since 7 February (including Flaming Dart), he determined that "the air strikes have not reduced in any major way the overall military capabilities of the DRV." He further concluded that the raids had minimal economic effects. Yet he also thought that the recent destruction of the Thanh Hoa and Tong Phuong railroad bridges provided the chance "to apply a serious stricture to the DRV logistical support to the South."³⁷

The campaign's progression through April at the same level of intensity caused Sharp and other officers concern. Johnson's decision in NSAM 328 to allow American offensive ground operations, combined with his refusal to increase Rolling Thunder, led some commanders to question the air effort's intent. On 20 April, McNamara convened a conference in Honolulu to guarantee that principal military and civilian leaders in the Pacific understood the President's perception of the war. Wheeler, Westmoreland, Sharp, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John T. McNaughton participated in the conference, along with McNamara. The Secretary's report of the meeting stated that none of those present expected a Communist capitulation in less than six months, and that all agreed that Rolling Thunder's current tempo was "about right." According to McNamara, Taylor presented a "majority view" that the air campaign should not strike Hanoi or Haiphong, for to do so, the ambassador believed, would "kill the hostage." The

³⁶Message 040304Z April 1965 from CINCPAC to JCS, in Commander-in-Chief, PACOM Outgoing Messages, 22 January-28 June 1965. Emphasis added.

³⁷CM 534-65, from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 6 April 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Ground Forces to Vietnam, July 1963," Vol. 3, Johnson Library, Box 41.

participants' "strategy for 'victory,'" McNamara wrote, "is to break the will of the DRV/VC by denying them victory." American forces would negate Communist success through ground combat in the South, and "it was agreed that tasks within South Vietnam should have first call on air assets."³⁸

The authors of the Pentagon Papers later commented that "Honolulu marked the relative downgrading of pressures against the North, in favor of more intensive activity in the South. . . . It seems logical that, with the decision to begin a major US ground force commitment, the air campaign should have been reduced in rank to second billing."³⁹ Such a conclusion presumes that McNamara's report reflected an accurate portrayal of the participants' attitudes. While it may have presented the current convictions of Westmoreland, Wheeler, and the civilian officials, it did not convey the feelings of Rolling Thunder's operational commander. Sharp subsequently remarked that the memorandum was "a distortion of the view that I took at that conference."⁴⁰ With the exception of a brief span in early April, the admiral remained convinced throughout his tenure as CINCPAC that intensive bombing was necessary to spur a settlement. He did not think that Hanoi would consider halting the aggression until Rolling Thunder affected--or threatened to affect--North Vietnam's capability to continue the struggle. McConnell and most Air Force officers concurred. McNamara himself argued for a large increase in bombing on 1 July.⁴¹ Once American ground forces helped stop the Communist advance in the fall of 1965, the Secretary then felt that bombing might persuade the North Vietnamese to negotiate.⁴² His memorandum

³⁸Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 21 April 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 358-59. Emphasis added.

³⁹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 359.

⁴⁰Sharp, p. 80.

⁴¹Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 26 June 1965 (Revised 1 July), National Security Files, NSC Meeting File, Vol. 3, Johnson Library, Box 1.

⁴²Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 3 November 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 2E, Johnson Library, Box 75.

of 21 April 1965 revealed his concern with a deteriorating military and political situation. The perceptions that he related were a revelation of his own beliefs at the moment rather than an enduring consensus of conference participants.

While continuing to argue for heavier raids, Sharp maintained that Rolling Thunder had hampered the North Vietnamese war effort. He declared on 12 May that commanders were more likely to minimize than exaggerate the campaign's effects. "Air attacks have disrupted road and rail movements in North Vietnam," he asserted, "[and] they have, in a few short weeks, completely changed the pattern of logistic support into Laos." Sharp conceded that interdiction could not totally stop the North's resupply of the Viet Cong. Yet he felt that increased raids would demonstrate American resolve to Hanoi and generate "a feeling of helplessness among the military and general frustration, anxiety, and fear among the people." The raids would, he believed, eventually cause Hanoi's attention to focus on internal problems rather than on outside aggression. The more intense the bombing, the greater its effect would be in changing the views of Northern leaders. "We should hammer home the main theme of our intent to destroy their military capacity and our determination to continue until the military leave their cousins in peace," the admiral contended.⁴³

Sharp's call for heavier attacks came at the start of a five-day bombing pause, and the air campaign's intensity did not significantly increase after the pause's cessation. Despite the beginning of large-scale Communist assaults in the South, bombing remained below the 20th parallel during May and June. McConnell denounced the campaign's limited nature and again called for attacks on all 94 targets, especially industrial sites.⁴⁴ The Joint Chiefs backed McNamara's 1 July recommendation for more bombing, although they desired a campaign focused on interdiction. The chiefs suggested mining Northern ports, attacking major bridges

⁴³Message 120314Z May 1965 from CINCPAC to JCS, in Commander-in-Chief, PACOM, Outgoing Messages, 22 January-28 June 1965.

⁴⁴Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 384-85.

along the routes from Hanoi to China, bombing POL storage areas, and raiding airfields and SAM batteries.⁴⁵ The President decided against increasing Rolling Thunder's severity and chose instead to enlarge America's combat role on the ground in the South. On 28 July 1965, he announced that an additional 30,000 men would go to Vietnam immediately, and that 30,000 more would follow by the end of the year. The scale of Rolling Thunder attacks was to remain the same.

Although Johnson's emphasis on ground combat did not indicate a lack of faith in air power,⁴⁶ the air leaders' call for increased bombing during the late spring and early summer of 1965 revealed different views of how Rolling Thunder could accomplish the perceived military objective. Sharp, McConnell, and Wheeler all believed that bombing the North was necessary to compel Hanoi to stop the insurgency. They also agreed, by mid-1965, that damaging the North's capability to fight was essential to weakening the enemy's will to resist. Yet they did not agree on what part of that capability should be destroyed to produce the maximum impact on the North's capacity, and willingness, to support the Viet Cong.

McConnell, like LeMay before him, thought that the North Vietnamese would not accept the destruction of their industry as a price for continuing the war. In addition, he believed that wrecking industry would devastate the North's economy, and that the threat of economic collapse would persuade Hanoi to yield. Wheeler saw Rolling Thunder as a means to limit the North's infiltration of men and equipment to the South. Restricting the Communist resupply capability would, he thought, ultimately guarantee that the growing American and South Vietnamese ground forces could defeat any enemy attempt to overthrow the Southern government. He felt that the Communists' inability to win in the South, combined with a large American ground

⁴⁵Ibid., 4: 24.

⁴⁶See Chapter II, pp. 99-100.

offensive, would convince Hanoi to stop the insurgency.⁴⁷ Increased bombing, and mining, would further restrict the North's infiltration capability and thereby hasten Hanoi's realization that it could not win. Sharp's perception of Rolling Thunder blended the views of McConnell and Wheeler. While thinking that the air campaign could restrict Hanoi's capability to back the Viet Cong, he also believed that some destruction of the North's economy was necessary before Hanoi would halt the insurgency.

Rolling Thunder thus became a compromise for military chiefs, but it was a compromise different from that reached by civilian officials. Whereas civilian leaders in the winter of 1965 had seen Rolling Thunder as an appropriate means to accomplish disparate goals, military chiefs in the summer of 1965 agreed on the ends sought by bombing. McConnell, Wheeler, and Sharp differed over how best to employ air power to achieve the common objective of destroying the North's capability to fight. By the end of July, the three concurred that the air campaign had placed a cap on North Vietnam's infiltration capacity,⁴⁸ although both McConnell and Sharp felt that this was insufficient to deter Hanoi, and Wheeler thought that heavier bombing would produce results faster. Still, the three thought that Rolling Thunder limited the North's capacity to support the Viet Cong. McNamara shared this conviction. "We have every reason to believe that the strikes at infiltration routes have at least put a ceiling on what the North Vietnamese can pour into South Vietnam, thereby putting a ceiling on the size of the war that the enemy can wage there," he commented on 28 July.⁴⁹ Rolling Thunder's perceived effect on infiltration became one of the few mutual assumptions of

⁴⁷Oral History Interview of General Earle G. Wheeler by Dorothy Pierce McSweeney, Washington, D.C., 21 August 1969, Johnson Library, Tape 1, p. 30.

⁴⁸McConnell commented in 1969: "The interdiction . . . certainly cut down the capability of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong to carry on sustained operations." See McConnell interview, 28 August 1969, Tape 1, p. 22.

⁴⁹Memorandum from McNamara for the President, 28 July 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 40.

civilian and military leaders regarding the air campaign for much of its duration. The notion did not completely disappear until the 1968 Tet Offensive revealed it a myth.

THE TARGET SELECTION PROCESS

Despite air leaders' pleas for heavier bombing, Johnson and his principal civilian advisors tightly controlled the target selection process. The President's perception of Rolling Thunder's military objective differed from that of his air commanders. Although he desired a reduction of the North's capability to fight, he refused to let bombing threaten the attainment of his negative objectives. Those negative goals prevented a rapid extension of the air campaign. Final target approval occurred at Johnson's Tuesday White House luncheons, attended by McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy (until his replacement by Walt Rostow), and Press Secretary Bill Moyers. Not until late October 1967, when General Wheeler began attending, did these sessions include a military representative.⁵⁰ Geography drove target selection, and all targets picked before August 1965 were south of the 20th parallel.

Because of his negative objectives, the President advanced the bomb line northward slowly. He did not authorize attacks against areas near Hanoi or Haiphong until June 1966. The cities themselves became "prohibited areas" that pilots could not overfly without specific permission from Johnson. To avoid provoking the Russians and Chinese, he forbade attacks on airfields and SAM sites while the North Vietnamese constructed the facilities. The President believed that such raids might kill advisers from the Communist superpowers, thereby triggering intervention.⁵¹ "The decision to hit or not hit [a target]," McNamara remarked, "is a function of three primary elements:

⁵⁰David C. Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment," Diplomatic History 8 (Winter 1984), p. 90. Humphrey notes that many accounts have listed Wheeler as a member beginning in 1966, and his careful research of primary documents shows that this was not the case.

⁵¹Ginsburgh interview, 26 May 1971, p. 50.

the value of the target, the risk of US pilot loss, and the risk of widening the war, and it depends on the balance among those elements as to whether we should or should not hit."⁵² Johnson also thought that bombing civilians might prompt the Soviets or Chinese to "widen the war," plus it would likely result in an international outcry. "The concern for the lives of the civilian populace is overriding in almost everything up there," observed Major General Ginsburgh.⁵³ Occasionally this concern led the Tuesday lunch group to select routes of flight for attacking aircraft.⁵⁴

Johnson's personal control of the air war limited options for air commanders implementing Rolling Thunder. The Tuesday lunch group initially assigned targets in "packages" of one per week, although this changed to packages of three every two weeks by September 1965. The group members also allocated a specific number of sorties against selected targets to achieve an 80 percent rate of destruction. Until accomplishing that amount of damage, aircrews repeatedly attacked the same targets for the one or two week period. Losses increased as the North Vietnamese realized that the constraints would allow them to mass their defenses for extended periods of time around a small number of targets. Weather further hampered the effort, because aircrews could fly the assigned sorties only during the one or two weeks allowed. At the end of a package's allotted time, the unflown sorties were lost unless Johnson and his advisors reapproved the same target in a subsequent package. Targets receiving a greater sortie allocation than air commanders felt appropriate did not result in fewer sorties than assigned. "Obviously, if you do not fly them [the allocated sorties], you can make a case that you did not really need them anyway," reasoned Seventh Air Force Deputy Commander Major General Gilbert L. Meyers. "We wanted to

⁵²Air War against North Vietnam, part 4, 25 August 1967, p. 333.

⁵³Ginsburgh interview, 26 May 1971, p. 36.

⁵⁴Interview of Dean Rusk by the author, Athens, Georgia, 15 July 1985.

be sure there would be no loss of future sorties on the basis that we had not flown them in the past period."⁵⁵

The President's detailed management of the bombing did not mean that the Joint Chiefs played no role in conducting Rolling Thunder. On the contrary, they submitted numerous proposals through McNamara for systematic campaigns of heavier intensity. Yet Johnson's personal direction on a weekly basis compelled the Chairman to improvise a more expeditious means for providing targeting suggestions than the formal recommendation process. "The White House wanted to tightly control and approve each individual target, each piece of real estate that was authorized for strike. For this reason and in the interest of time, in seven days you just couldn't sit down and work a JCS paper and get joint agreement across the board," reflected Colonel Henry H. Edelen, an Air Staff officer involved in North Vietnam contingency planning. In March 1965, Wheeler organized a "Rolling Thunder Team," consisting of two officers, one Army and one Navy, in the Pacific Division of the Joint Staff. Neither individual was a pilot; however, they reviewed the targeting proposals stemming from Sharp's headquarters and made their suggestions to Wheeler, who in turn provided target recommendations to McNamara prior to the Tuesday lunches. "If time permitted, the Chairman would call the proposals to the attention of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and then go forward with them," commented Edelen. "Nowhere in this pattern did the Air Force really play a role."⁵⁶

The workload involved in preparing the packages, the lack of experienced personnel, and the displeasure expressed by McConnell "because there was no Air Force representation anywhere in the decision-making process" led Wheeler to expand the

⁵⁵Air War against North Vietnam, part 5, 27-29 August 1967, pp. 476-485; Interview of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Ferguson by the author, 17 May 1985, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

⁵⁶USAF Oral History Interview of Colonel Henry H. Edelen by Major Samuel F. Riddlebarger and Lieutenant Colonel S. Bissell, 27 January 1970, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-243, pp. 1-6, 15-17, 24-26. Emphasis added.

Rolling Thunder Team to five members in May 1965. Colonel Edelen became the single Air Force representative, and was joined by officers from the Marine Corps and Navy. Before the air campaign ended in 1968, an Army officer and another Air Force officer increased the team total to seven.⁵⁷

After expanding the Rolling Thunder Team in May, Wheeler attempted to include the service chiefs in the planning process. Before advocating a substantial shift in target priorities, he discussed his ideas with his colleagues during one of their weekly meetings. He could then modify individual package proposals to reflect those opinions that he accepted. "I would not necessarily submit the smaller programs to the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Wheeler commented, "because I knew their views on the broader programs."⁵⁸ The service chiefs received word of Wheeler's weekly (or bi-weekly) target proposals from action officers assigned to monitor the Rolling Thunder Team's progress. After the team members made their initial target selections, they advised the action officers of the choices. These officers briefed the targets to their respective service chiefs and remained alert for changes in the team's proposals. The officers also notified the chiefs on Friday mornings of last-minute alterations, which allowed the service heads to voice disagreement to the Chairman during their weekly meeting on Friday afternoons.⁵⁹

If any of the chiefs opposed the target proposals on Friday, Wheeler's team had little time to make changes. The Secretary of Defense requested a copy of the proposals prior to his weekly discussion of the bombing with Rusk, which occurred in McNamara's office on Saturday or Sunday.⁶⁰ McNamara had originally asked Wheeler to provide the White House and State Department with copies of the target proposals prior to the Tuesday lunch. In October 1965, the Secretary advised the Chairman to

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 6, 24.

⁵⁸Air War against North Vietnam, part 2, 16 August 1967, p. 139.

⁵⁹Edelen interview, 27 January 1970, p. 28.

⁶⁰Rusk interview, 15 July 1985.

forward the advance copies for the White House and State Department to him. He then decided whether to provide those offices with early copies.⁶¹

McNamara dominated the targeting process for much of Rolling Thunder.

Remembered Edelen:

Initially, the guiding light in establishing the weight of effort authorized was the Secretary of Defense. He attempted to keep sortie allocations at a low level for reasons best known to himself. There were a whole series of instances when we'd run out of sorties. In other words, there were targets available but no strike sorties available to CINCPAC to put on the targets. Then CINCPAC would send in a message and we'd have to get the approval. The approval came in all cases from the Secretary of Defense.⁶²

Unlike most of Johnson's civilian advisors, McNamara frequently proposed targets at the Tuesday lunches, and not all his proposals came from the list prepared by Wheeler's Rolling Thunder Team. During periods when the Tuesday lunch group did not meet, and when the President did not feel that the proposed target list needed his personal endorsement, the Secretary had authority to approve targets.⁶³

CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW, AUGUST 1965--MARCH 1968

INTERDICTION DOMINATES, AUGUST--DECEMBER 1965

After Johnson's expansion of the ground war in July 1965, the Joint Chiefs redoubled their efforts to intensify Rolling Thunder. On 27 August, they gave McNamara two memorandums calling for increased bombing through an eight-week program. Unlike their March 12-week proposal, the eight-week plan did not advocate a gradual expansion of Rolling Thunder. The scheme first called for attacks on military installations in Haiphong and Hon Gay, the mining of ports, and raids on roads and rail lines north of Hanoi. After this effort, Air Force and Navy aircraft would strike airfields, SAM sites, and other military facilities in Hanoi. Next would come attacks on

⁶¹Edelen interview, 27 January 1970, pp. 13-14.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 38-39.

⁶³Telephone interview with Robert S. McNamara by the author, 15 December 1986.

POL storage areas and electric power stations, followed by raids on Hanoi and Haiphong industry. Heavy interdiction of major supply routes would supplement all phases of the campaign.⁶⁴

The Joint Chiefs referred to their plan as an "accelerated interdiction" program to make the North Vietnamese stop the war or to make them ineffective if they pursued it. Yet the proposal was much more than a program to limit support to the Viet Cong. The plan reflected the combined ideas of Wheeler, McConnell, and Sharp, and it revealed an intent to achieve the goals of all three air commanders. "Stepped-up interdiction efforts against the DRV target system would significantly affect industrial and commercial activity in the DRV and place in serious jeopardy the viability of the nonagricultural sector of the North Vietnamese economy," the Joint Chiefs remarked. The impact of intensified interdiction on the North's economy could, the chiefs declared, compel Hanoi to choose between supporting Communist forces in the South and fulfilling "the increasing domestic needs" of the Northern populace.⁶⁵

The Joint Chiefs warned that the current air campaign could not completely eliminate adequate logistical support to the enemy. They blamed controls on both targeting and weight of effort, along with the small amounts of aid required by current Viet Cong and North Vietnamese operations, for Rolling Thunder's failure to affect the supply flow. To curtail that movement, air power would not only have to interdict supplies going south, it would also have to reduce the amount of goods entering North Vietnam. In addition, American and South Vietnamese ground forces would have to raise "the intensity of combat to that level where VC/DRV consumption rates of heavy items, principally ammunition, could not be sustained by present [resupply] efforts." If American ground forces did not expand combat operations, and Rolling Thunder's scope

⁶⁴JCSM 613-65, Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 27 August 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 2EE, Johnson Library, Box 75. Hon Gay was North Vietnam's second largest port city.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

remained limited, the chiefs believed that Johnson would ultimately face what he sought most to avoid: superpower intervention. "Our strategy for Vietnam should not allow the communists to keep pace with or more than match our military efforts," the chiefs reasoned. "A program of slowly rising intensity with both sides in step carries with it the danger that it will lead to less flexibility of choice, creeping intervention by the Soviets and Chinese, first with material and later with troops, and the eventual engulfing of both camps unwillingly into an expanded war."⁶⁶

McNamara refused to back the Joint Chiefs' proposal, although the monthly Rolling Thunder sortie total increased from 2879 in August to 3553 in September. In September, American pilots began the interdiction of rail and highway routes in northwestern North Vietnam; in October, they attacked bridges on the Northeast Railroad from Hanoi to China. By the end of October, they had struck 126 of the 240 targets on the Joint Chiefs' expanded target list. Of those remaining, 73 were in the "off-limits" areas of Hanoi, Haiphong, and the 30-mile zone near the Chinese border. Most of the others were in the "northeast quadrant," an area bounded by 20 degrees 40 minutes latitude and 105 degrees 20 minutes longitude containing Hanoi, Haiphong, and the territory north of both cities. Because of the quadrant's concentration of population and industry, Johnson was reluctant to approve attacks in it. Yet, if he planned to continue gradually increasing air pressure on the North, he had little alternative to striking targets in the North Vietnamese heartland.⁶⁷

McNamara perceived a need for attacks in the northeast quadrant as a prelude to introducing more ground troops in the South. Westmoreland had devised a three-phased plan to defeat the Communist forces, and to accomplish each phase's objective required added manpower. The Secretary felt that additional bombing was

⁶⁶Ibid., JCSM 652-65, 27 August 1965.

⁶⁷"Cumulative Statistics, Southeast Asia," in DJSM 1162-65, 5 October 1965, National Security Files, Name File: Colonel R. C. Bowman, Johnson Library, Box 1; JCS Briefing Text, "Air Operations against North Vietnam and Laos," January 1967; Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 59.

necessary prior to starting Phase II deployments.⁶⁸ On 3 November, he advised the President to adopt an "evolving" Rolling Thunder program that would gradually permit attacks on targets in the heartland. The effort would span five months, concluding with raids on POL storage areas and the mining of Haiphong harbor. Following the program, Johnson could begin Phase II deployments. "I favor 'evolution' of Rolling Thunder before Phase II deployments because . . . I believe that there is a finite chance that added pressure on the North, without Phase II deployments, may be enough to bring the DRV/VC to terms," McNamara asserted. He maintained that the public would more likely approve Phase II deployments if the administration first conducted his evolving Rolling Thunder program.⁶⁹

Besides asking Johnson to expand the air campaign, the Secretary recommended that the President should first halt Rolling Thunder for four weeks. McNamara argued that a bombing pause would offer the North Vietnamese the chance to move towards a settlement. Also, he thought that a pause would reduce the dangers of intervention in response to his planned raids on the heartland, and that the measure would demonstrate that American attempts to end the war were genuine. Finally, it would set the stage for another pause, possibly in late 1966, that might produce a settlement. He suggested that the pause should be a "hard-line" effort in which the administration firmly committed itself to a bombing resumption unless Hanoi began to stop their support to the Viet Cong.⁷⁰

Shortly after McNamara's proposal, the Joint Chiefs concluded that Rolling Thunder was having a minimal impact of the North Vietnamese war-making capacity. The chiefs claimed that bombing had not weakened the Communist armed forces except

⁶⁸The President had ordered "Phase I" deployments in July 1965 to stymie the Communist advance. Phase II called for an additional 125,000 men to allow American and South Vietnamese forces to control 65 percent of the South's population and 20-30 percent of its land by the spring of 1967.

⁶⁹McNamara memorandum from McNamara to the President, 3 November 1965.

⁷⁰Ibid.

to limit their capability for overt aggression. While infiltration was more difficult, they noted that it continued at the level needed to support the enemy's combat activity in the South. Further, the strikes had not brought Hanoi's leaders any closer to abandoning the insurgency. Once more the chiefs blamed political controls for the paucity of results. They asserted: "The establishment and observance of de facto sanctuaries within the DRV, coupled with a denial of operations against the most important military and war-supporting targets, precludes complete attainment of the objectives of the air campaign." They called for a "dramatic" change in Rolling Thunder "which will leave no doubt that the US intends to win and achieve a level of destruction which they [the North Vietnamese] will not be able to overcome." Primary targets for such an effort were POL storage areas and power plants, followed by airfields, supply routes, and port facilities.⁷¹ A 20 November message from Sharp echoed the chiefs' arguments, although the admiral listed POL and port facilities as the most important targets in the North.⁷²

Johnson pondered the proposals from McNamara and the Joint Chiefs during the late fall of 1965. On 18 December, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin told McGeorge Bundy that if the bombing stopped for a three-week span the Soviets would attempt to persuade Hanoi to negotiate a settlement.⁷³ McNamara, Rusk, William Bundy, and Under Secretary of State George Ball urged the President to order a bombing halt. While Rusk, William Bundy, and Ball thought that a diplomatic move might yield success, McNamara still considered the pause in the light of stronger measures to come. Johnson harbored reservations, deeming the likelihood of failure as "the most

⁷¹JCSM 811-65, from the Chairman, JCS, for the Secretary of Defense, 10 November 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, JCS Memorandums, Vol. 2, Johnson Library, Box 193.

⁷²Message 202213Z November 1965 from CINCPAC to JCS, in Commander-in-Chief, PACOM, Outgoing Messages, 25 July-7 December 1965, AFHRC, file number K712.1623-2.

⁷³Oral History Interview of William Bundy by Paige E. Muihoilan, 26 May 1969, Johnson Library, Tape 3, p. 16

dangerous aspect" of a pause.⁷⁴ He thought that a bombing halt would have little chance of producing an accord, and that the inability to secure peace would lead to an increased demand from Republican Congressmen to end American involvement. The President continued to believe that the lack of unified Congressional support for the war would cause public attention to focus on Vietnam rather than on his domestic social programs. Much like the Joint Chiefs' eight-week bombing proposal, an extended pause marked an extreme change in the conduct of the war that could not escape the public's notice. Moreover, the Joint chiefs contended that a pause would relieve, rather than spur, pressure on the North to negotiate.

Despite these considerations, on 27 December Johnson relented to the pleas of his top civilian advisors and ordered an extension to the bombing pause that was part of a limited Christmas truce. The President originally intended the extension to last for 24 to 36 hours, but on the 29th he refused to resume Rolling Thunder. The Soviets had dispatched Polish diplomat Jerzy Michalski to Hanoi to attempt a settlement, and Johnson waited on results. Hanoi did not respond quickly. By the middle of January, the Joint Chiefs' requests for renewed bombing had become a clamor, yet the President persisted in waiting for a signal from the North. It finally arrived in Rome at the end of the month. The Pope received a letter from Ho Chi Minh bluntly stating the North's commitment to pursue the war to victory and denouncing the pause as a "sham peace trick." Rusk summarized the frustration felt by administration officials in a meeting on the 29th: "The enormous effort made in the last 34 days has produced nothing--no

⁷⁴"12:35 P.M. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Bombing Pause," 18 December 1965, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1.

runs, no hits, no errors." Johnson's advisors now unanimously agreed that he should restart Rolling Thunder.⁷⁵

THE EMPHASIS SHIFTS TO OIL, JANUARY--AUGUST 1966

The pause's failure to produce a settlement had a profound effect on Johnson. Despite recommendations from his civilian advisors that a pause would benefit the American war effort, he maintained doubts about the measure's utility throughout its 37-day span. Ho Chi Minh's response only confirmed the President's conviction that "he had been talked into doing something that was essentially a sucker's move".⁷⁶ Ho's reply also gave Johnson a greater appreciation for the North's determination. The American Army's fall defeat of Communist forces in the Ia Drang Valley and the dropping of 40,000 tons of bombs on the North had not weakened Hanoi's willingness to fight. As a result of the perceived failure of civilian leaders to provide him with sound advice, and the North's resolution, the President listened more intently to his military chiefs' call for "dramatic" air raids.

The 31 January resumption of Rolling Thunder was a murmur rather than a roar, however. Although intending to launch heavy strikes against the North, Johnson thought that a strong display of force in the pause's immediate aftermath would cause

⁷⁵William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 3, pp. 16-21; "Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam," 3 January 1966, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1; "Summary Notes of the 555th NSC Meeting," 3 January 1966, National Security Files, NSC Meeting Notes File, Vols. 3-5, Johnson Library, Box 2; "Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Bombing Pause," 10 January 1966, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1; "Meeting in Cabinet Room," 27 January 1966, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1; "Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Resumption of Bombing," 28 January 1966, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1; Chester L. Cooper, The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1970), p. 294; "Summary Notes of the 556th NSC Meeting," 29 January 1966, National Security Files, NSC Meeting Notes File, Vols. 3-5, Johnson Library, Box 2.

⁷⁶William Bundy interview, 26 May 1969, Tape 3, p. 24.

many people to consider the cessation an insincere effort to achieve peace.⁷⁷ Upon restarting Rolling Thunder, he prohibited attacks against fixed targets and limited interdiction to areas south of the 21st parallel. Targets within a 30-mile radius from the center of Hanoi, and within a 10-mile radius from the center of Haiphong, were off-limits. These controls remained until 1 April, when the President revealed his intention to strike the North's oil storage facilities.⁷⁸

In November 1965, the Joint Chiefs determined that oil was a vital ingredient of the North's infiltration capability. With five North Vietnamese Army regiments in the South, Hanoi had expanded its truck fleet to resupply its troops. The vulnerability of rail lines to interdiction increased the trucks' value as a logistical tool. By destroying the North's oil supply, the chiefs believed that they could render the trucks useless and strain Hanoi's capacity to equip its growing forces in the South. They pointed out that the North possessed no oil fields or refineries and had imported 170,000 metric tons of POL in 1965. Most imports arrived at Haiphong, the only port capable of conveniently handling the bulk supplies carried by large tankers. Prior to distribution, the North Vietnamese stored the oil entering Haiphong at tank farms two miles from the city. The chiefs considered these storage sites, with a holding capacity of 72,000 metric tons, the most vulnerable part of the POL target system. They insisted that the facilities' destruction, followed by raids on the eight remaining major storage areas, would "be more damaging to the DRV capability to move war-supporting resources . . . than attacks against any other target system."⁷⁹ Sharp, who independently examined the

⁷⁷At a 20 January 1966 Cabinet Meeting, Johnson told his advisors that he planned "to drive the nail in" with air power if the North Vietnamese did not favorably respond to the pause. Yet he also said that the administration "must be careful and cautious" in renewing Rolling Thunder. See "Cabinet Room Meeting," 20 January 1966, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1.

⁷⁸JCS Briefing Text, "Air Operations against North Vietnam and Laos," January 1967.

⁷⁹JCSM 810-65, "Air Operations against the North Vietnam POL System," 10 November 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, JCS Memorandums, Vol. 1, Johnson Library, Box 193. The chiefs estimated that dismantling the North's oil storage capacity would require 416 aircraft sorties and cause 44 civilian casualties.

merits of striking POL, reached a stronger conclusion. In the midst of the January bombing pause, he argued that the destruction of POL storage sites, combined with intensified interdiction in the northeast quadrant and mining, "will bring the enemy to the conference table or cause the insurgency to wither from lack of support."⁸⁰

Intelligence estimates differed on the effect that attacking POL would have on the North's capability to continue the war. In November 1965, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) analysts revealed that the North possessed a total POL storage capacity of 179,000 metric tons while requiring only 32,000 metric tons a year to sustain current combat operations. Yet they also stated that attacks on the Haiphong storage area would reduce the Communists' capacity to move large units or heavy equipment.⁸¹ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) evaluators asserted at the end of December that raids on the Haiphong sites would have minimal impact on the war in the South. The loss of the storage facilities would slow the Communists' logistical flow, but the enemy needed a daily average of only 12 tons of supplies, and this amount "would continue to move by one means or another." The CIA examiners noted that destroying the Haiphong sites would cause the North Vietnamese to import oil overland. As most oil came from the Soviet Union, this would create political problems for the Russians, who would have to send it south over Chinese railroads. Hanoi's economy would suffer as well, the analysts surmised, because the disruption of normal rail traffic would limit the North's industrial output and complicate the internal distribution of goods.⁸² In January 1966, the DIA further contended that destroying both the Haiphong storage area and dispersed POL sites would produce local oil shortages and transportation bottlenecks.⁸³

⁸⁰Message from Sharp to the JCS, 12 January 1966, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 40. Emphasis added.

⁸¹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 67. The Defense Intelligence Agency comprised military analysts from the four services.

⁸²Intelligence Assessment by Richard Helms, 28 December 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 64-65.

⁸³Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 68.

Defense Department officials initially hesitated to endorse POL attacks, although they believed that Rolling Thunder should continue. In mid-January, Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton named the destruction of POL third on his list of essentials for an effective interdiction program. He considered intensive, around-the-clock armed reconnaissance the primary requirement, followed by the destruction of untargeted transportation facilities. Yet McNaughton doubted that any interdiction could stymie the Communist supply flow. He remarked that enemy forces needed 80 tons of supply a day to sustain light combat, and that the expected infiltration of men during 1966 would raise that amount to only 140 tons, less than three-quarters of the current monthly average arriving in the South. McNaughton felt that intensive bombing was necessary, however, if for no other reason than to make the Chinese increase their aid to the North Vietnamese. Such assistance might threaten to "smother" North Vietnam, causing Hanoi to call off the insurgency rather than risk a loss of independence to its superpower neighbor.⁸⁴

Instead of continued interdiction, the Assistant Secretary proposed raids against locks and dams. His rationale was similar to that of Air Force planners seeking to pressure the North Koreans and Chinese 13 years earlier. "Such destruction does not kill or drive a people," McNaughton asserted. "By shallow-flooding the rice, it leads after time to widespread starvation (more than a million?) unless food is provided--which we could offer to do 'at the conference table.'" Because dam attacks would not directly target the civilian populace, he insisted that they would not provoke the Chinese or Soviets. Still, McNaughton questioned bombing's ability to produce a settlement. As long as the North maintained the initiative in the South, he did not believe that Rolling Thunder could end the war.⁸⁵

⁸⁴John T. McNaughton, "Some Observations about Bombing North Vietnam," 18 January 1966, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 42-49.

⁸⁵Ibid.

McNamara, too, suggested increased bombing at the end of January. He advised the President to raise the number of strike sorties to 4000 a month, a monthly increase of roughly 300 over the totals for late 1965. The Secretary doubted that additional bombing could place a "tight ceiling" on the Communist effort in the South. Yet he noted that Rolling Thunder had heightened infiltration's cost and had forced the North Vietnamese to divert manpower to air defense activities and repair work. Continued bombing might, McNamara commented, "condition" Hanoi "toward negotiations and an acceptable end to the war." In addition, he thought that it would help maintain South Vietnamese morale.⁸⁶

By March 1966, McNamara and Johnson both felt that the time was ripe to subject the North to sterner measures. On the 10th, the Joint Chiefs reasserted their conviction that destroying major oil storage areas would significantly damage Hanoi's capability to sustain Communist forces in the South.⁸⁷ McNamara asked the President to order attacks on seven oil storage sites, including the Haiphong storage area.⁸⁸ He further recommended raids on the Haiphong cement plant and supply routes in the northeast quadrant. The cement plant furnished 50 percent of the North's cement, and McNamara and the chiefs thought that its destruction would hamper road and bridge construction.⁸⁹ Johnson was receptive to the proposals. He told Bromley Smith, the executive secretary to the National Security Council (NSC), that he desired a "maximum effort" against infiltration during the next two months.⁹⁰ On 1 April, the President gave Sharp permission to strike four bridges in the northeast quadrant and to interdict

⁸⁶Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 24 January 1966, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 49, 68.

⁸⁷Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 76.

⁸⁸The Secretary believed that attacks against two airfield storage sites recommended by the JCS would cause heavy civilian casualties.

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 77-78.

⁹⁰Note from Johnson to Bromley Smith, 19 March 1966, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 2 EE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

nine main supply routes in the heartland. The admiral also received orders to plan for April raids against the seven POL storage areas and the cement plant.⁹¹

Domestic turmoil in South Vietnam dashed Johnson's hopes to attack oil in April. On 12 March, Premier Nguyen Cao Ky removed his primary political opponent, the popular general Nguyen Chanh Thi, from command of I Corps. Thi's dismissal caused Buddhist monks to begin anti-Ky demonstrations in Da Nang and Hue. Dissidents joined the protest, not only condemning the Ky regime but also denouncing the American presence in Vietnam and calling for negotiations with the Viet Cong. Newsmen portrayed the unrest to the United States. In Congress, both Democrats and Republicans questioned the propriety of American involvement to save a people that did not appear to want assistance. Over 10,000 Buddhists demonstrated in Saigon on the 31st, and similar displays occurred in other cities the following week. Johnson had been reluctant to begin Rolling Thunder in February 1965 in the wake of Southern political turbulence, and he was unwilling a year later to increase the air campaign's intensity until Ky restored order.⁹² Calm did not return until early May, when Ky dispatched 1000 South Vietnamese Marines to Da Nang to quell the protests.

In the meantime, international efforts to start negotiations further delayed the POL raids. Early in April, United Nations Secretary General U Thant proposed a bombing halt as a prerequisite to negotiations; on 29 April, Canadian Prime Minister Michael Pearson suggested a ceasefire to start talks, and a gradual troop withdrawal once discussions began. In May, officials from the Netherlands, Guinea, and Algeria called for a bombing halt as the initial step towards peace in Vietnam. The publicity of these attempts prevented Johnson from ordering the oil strikes, as any increase in the

⁹¹JCS Briefing Text, "Air Operations against North Vietnam and Laos," January 1967; Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4:79.

⁹²Andrew J. Goodpaster, "Telephone Conversations with General Eisenhower," 25 April 1966, National Security Files, Name File: President Eisenhower, Johnson Library, Box 3.

air campaign could be seen as "worsening the atmosphere" of the peace efforts.⁹³ The continued delay also caused the President to have second thoughts about the raids' necessity.

Johnson's counselors argued against any cessation of the bombing and urged him to order the oil attacks. Maxwell Taylor, serving as special military advisor after his July 1963 return from Vietnam, told the President: "If we gave up bombing in order to start discussions, we would not have the coins necessary to pay for all the concessions required for a satisfactory settlement."⁹⁴ William Bundy advised not to quit bombing unless the North Vietnamese stopped infiltration and reduced military operations in the South.⁹⁵ Walt Rostow, who had replaced McGeorge Bundy as National Security Advisor, argued that Johnson should attack POL as soon as conditions permitted. Referring to the raids on German oil during World War II, he asserted that attacking North Vietnam's major reserves could severely damage Hanoi's capability to fight. "Oil moves in various logistical channels from central sources," he maintained. "When the central sources began to dry up the effects proved fairly prompt and widespread. What look like reserves statistically are rather inflexible commitments to logistical pipelines."⁹⁶

At the end of May, Johnson allowed strikes against six small POL storage facilities in unpopulated areas, but he refused to order raids against the major sites.⁹⁷ Canadian Ambassador Chester Ronning planned a mid-June trip to Hanoi to determine

⁹³Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 94.

⁹⁴Memorandum from Maxwell Taylor to the President, 27 April 1966, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 95.

⁹⁵Memorandum from William Bundy to the Secretary of State, 3 May 1966, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 97.

⁹⁶Memorandum from Walt Rostow to McNamara and Rusk, 6 May 1966, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 100-101.

⁹⁷The authors of the Pentagon Papers speculate that Johnson gave the order for strikes on major POL storage areas at the end of May. Minutes from 17 and 22 June NSC Meetings, not cited in the Pentagon Papers, disprove this supposition.

the Communists' negotiating attitude, and Rusk wanted the main POL strikes delayed until Ronning's return. On 17 June, after Ronning's mission had failed, Johnson told NSC members that he was still uncertain about initiating the POL attacks.⁹⁸ He remained hesitant five days later. At an NSC meeting on the 22nd, McNamara, Wheeler, Taylor, William Bundy, and CIA Director William Rayborn argued strongly for the raids' immediate start. The following exchange between Wheeler and the President typified the intensity of the discussions:

Wheeler: A POL strike will not stop infiltration, but it will establish another ceiling on what they can support. There are three divisions there with another ready to move.

Johnson: Suppose your dreams are fulfilled. What are the results?

Wheeler: Over the next 60 to 90 days, this will start to affect the total infiltration effort. It will cost them more. In a very real sense, this is a war of attrition.

Johnson: You have no qualification, no doubt that this is in the national interest?

Wheeler: None whatsoever.

Johnson: People tell me what not to do, what I do wrong. I don't get any alternatives. What might I be asked next? Destroy industry, disregard human life? Suppose I say no, what else would you recommend?

Wheeler: Mining Haiphong harbor.

Johnson: Do you think this will involve the Chinese Communists and the Soviets?

Wheeler: No sir.

Johnson: Are you more sure than MacArthur was?⁹⁹

The consensus from his military and civilian advisors that oil attacks were necessary persuaded Johnson to begin the raids. After the meeting, he ordered strikes on the Hanoi and Haiphong oil storage areas for dawn on 24 June. Attacks would follow

⁹⁸"National Security Council Meeting, 17 June 1966," Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1. The President stated at the meeting: "A decision on bombing is not being made now and one is not imminent."

⁹⁹"National Security Council Meeting, 22 June 1966," Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1.

on the remaining five facilities. The President felt that the raids would persuade Northern leaders to negotiate. "I thought that if we could seriously affect their POL supplies, and we could make it much more difficult for this infiltration to succeed, that they'd look at their hole card and say, well, what's the use, maybe we ought to try to work out some agreement," he recalled.¹⁰⁰ To assure that the attacks did not disturb world public opinion or provoke the Chinese or Soviets, Johnson went to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties. Handpicked crews would fly the missions, and they would not attack under marginal weather conditions. If poor weather delayed the strikes, the President stated that they could not begin on Sunday, 26 June.¹⁰¹

Poor weather caused two postponements, and on 24 June the Wall Street Journal published details of the prospective attacks on Haiphong's POL. Appalled by the security leak, Johnson cancelled the raids the next day, but he did not intend the repeal as a permanent measure. Military preparations for the strikes continued. On the 28th, Sharp notified Wheeler that his forces were ready and that weather was favorable. The President rescinded the cancellation, and on the 29th the attacks commenced.

Both military and civilian leaders felt that the initial raids were a success. The Haiphong storage area appeared 80 percent destroyed, and the Hanoi site, containing 34,000 metric tons of POL, was completely demolished. To General Meyers, the operation was "the most significant, the most important strike of the war." McNamara sent a congratulatory message to the field commanders who planned and executed the attacks. At Honolulu on 8 July, the Secretary told Sharp that the President wanted a complete "strangulation" of the North's POL system. Monthly strike sortie allocations jumped from 8100 to 10,100, and McNamara told the admiral not to feel any sortie limitations in attacking oil. A new directive for the air campaign reflected the emphasis on POL. Designated Rolling Thunder 51, it announced that concentrated

¹⁰⁰Oral History Interview of Lyndon Baines Johnson by William J. Jordan, LBJ Ranch, Texas, 12 August 1969, Johnson Library, p. 19.

¹⁰¹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 105-06.

strikes on the POL system would serve as "an essential element of the program to cause them [the North Vietnamese] to cease supporting, controlling, and directing insurgencies in Southeast Asia." General John D. Ryan, Commander of Pacific Air Forces, informed his units that the oil effort was necessary to reduce the North's war-making capability.¹⁰²

The American public strongly backed the initial raids, although the response from American allies was less favorable. In early July, a Harris opinion poll showed that the President's rating on his conduct of the war had risen 12 points, from a pre-bombing low of 42 percent in June to a post-bombing score of 54. The poll also revealed that Americans approved the attacks on the storage sites by better than five to one. The reason most cited for that approval was "a desire to get the war over with."¹⁰³ The raids received less acclaim in Europe, where several leaders questioned their wisdom. British Prime Minister Harold Wilson publicly dissociated himself from the attacks, and his action caused Johnson to view subsequent British statements on Vietnam with a jaundiced eye. "There's no doubt that in the President's mind this established Wilson . . . as a man not to go to the well with," William Bundy recalled.¹⁰⁴

The POL strikes continued throughout July and August. At the end of July, the DIA determined that bombing had reduced the North's POL storage capacity to 75,000 metric tons, yet the total was more than sufficient to meet requirements. Two-thirds of this amount remained in storage sites at Phuc Yen and Kep airfields, two of the main areas originally targeted by the Joint Chiefs in November 1965. Johnson denied Sharp's July request to attack the two facilities because of possible civilian casualties. As the raids progressed, however, DIA analysts concluded that destroying the airfield sites

¹⁰²Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 106, 109; Sharp, Strategy for Defeat, p. 119; Message 070323Z July 1966, from CINCPACAF to 7AF, in PACAF Outgoing Messages, 15 March-31 December 1966, AFHRC, file number K717.1623; Message 060730Z July 1966 from CINCPACAF to 7AF, in PACAF Outgoing Messages, 15 March-31 December 1966.

¹⁰³"Opening the Fourth Front," Newsweek, 18 July 1966, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴William Bundy interview, 29 May 1969, Tape 3, p. 36.

would not seriously affect the Northern war effort. They maintained that the North Vietnamese possessed enough dispersed storage areas to offset the bombing losses. Rather than continuing the attack against the small depots scattered throughout the North, the President directed Rolling Thunder's emphasis back to interdiction. On 4 September, Sharp declared that the air campaign's new priorities were the "attrition of men, supplies, and equipment."¹⁰⁵

The euphoria initially felt by civilian and military leaders over the POL raids vanished in the wake of a new analysis of Rolling Thunder. The Jason Summer Study, a group of 47 top scientists briefed on the war by administration officials, produced a 30 August report on the effects of bombing North Vietnam. The group's evaluation of the POL attacks was more pessimistic than the DIA assessment; the study estimated that only five percent of the North's POL requirements were necessary to support infiltration by truck, and that plenty of oil remained to support these operations. The Soviets could provide additional POL in easily-dispersible drums. "North Vietnam has basically a subsistence agricultural economy that presents a difficult and unrewarding target system for air attack," the Study concluded.¹⁰⁶

The Jason Study's observations, combined with the POL effort's failure to produce decisive results, caused McNamara to question Rolling Thunder's utility. Never again did he recommend an intensification of the air war. After a mid-October trip to South Vietnam, the Secretary returned to Washington convinced that Johnson should end the struggle through diplomacy rather than military force. He viewed the war in the South as a stalemate and rejected Sharp's request for a 140,000-man increase in ground troops. McNamara advised only a 40,000-man increase to Johnson, which would give the United States a total force of 470,000. The Secretary suggested that 10-20,000 of these troops could construct and maintain an infiltration barrier of wire, mines, and

¹⁰⁵Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 109-110.

¹⁰⁶Jason Summer Study, "The Effects of US Bombing in North Vietnam," Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 111-120.

sensors along South Vietnam's northern borders, while the remainder defeated the Communists inside the South. His scheme called for Rolling Thunder aircraft to interdict areas adjacent to the barrier. "I recommend, as a minimum, against increasing the level of bombing of North Vietnam and against increasing the intensity of operations by changing the areas or kinds of targets," McNamara urged the President. He also advised Johnson to stop bombing the North "for an indefinite period in connection with covert moves toward peace."¹⁰⁷

Major General Ginsburgh's assessment of the Jason Study's findings typified air commanders' perceptions of Rolling Thunder in September 1966. "The report is very difficult to refute conclusively," he observed, "because it involves many judgments which can not [sic] be proven wrong unless an expanded program is authorized." The "expanded program" that the general envisioned was one with minimal political controls. Despite bombing the North for a year and a half under the President's stringent guidelines, air chiefs continued to believe that Rolling Thunder could have a telling impact on the war if only they received a free hand. By conducting systematic campaigns against the enemy's economic assets, air leaders thought that they would ultimately strike the target essential to the North's war-making capability, which would in turn collapse the insurgency and cause Hanoi to sue for peace. Johnson's controls did not allow thorough campaigns against North Vietnamese target "systems." Nevertheless, by the fall of 1966, air commanders no longer believed that the transportation or POL systems were the "vital centers" of the North's capacity to fight. They were hesitant to suggest, however, that the essential component of Northern war-making capability might be other than a "modern" element of an industrial state. They were also loathe to admit that a year and a half of Rolling Thunder had no appreciable impact on the enemy. Ginsburgh reasoned: "The bombing of the North must have some

¹⁰⁷Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 14 October 1966, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 125-26.

effect on the war in the South and the punitive effects in the North must have some influence in measuring the course of the war in the South against the costs in the North."¹⁰⁸

THE SHIFT TO INDUSTRY AND ELECTRIC POWER, OCTOBER 1966--MAY 1967

The Joint Chiefs adamantly disagreed with McNamara's bleak view of the war in the fall of 1966. In response to the Secretary's call for a bombing halt to induce negotiations, they proposed attacks on power plants, industry, port facilities, and locks and dams. "The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the war has reached a stage at which decisions taken over the next sixty days can determine the outcome of the war," they declared to Johnson in mid-October 1966.¹⁰⁹ The chiefs condemned McNamara's barrier concept and argued that Rolling Thunder had prevented the Communists from mounting a major offensive. With Congressional elections on the horizon, the President was lukewarm to the chiefs' suggestion to expand the bombing. Several "peace candidates" challenged the administration's commitment to the war, and Johnson did not wish to give them encouragement by ordering heavy raids before the voting.

On 8 November, the Joint Chiefs elaborated on Rolling Thunder 32, their proposed directive for increased bombing. The program revealed their continuing desire to destroy the North's war-making capacity. Yet unlike their previous bombing proposals, Rolling Thunder 32 showed that they had decided to attack North Vietnamese will directly. The chiefs targeted eight major power plants "to affect to a major degree both military and civilian support to the war effort." They contended that the power plants' destruction would not only reduce the operating efficiency of railway shops and the Haiphong shipyards, but would also disrupt the daily regimen of the inhabitants of

¹⁰⁸Memorandum from Ginsburgh to Walt Rostow, 13 September 1966, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder: Effects of US Bombing, Johnson Library, Box 192. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁹Quoted in Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 128.

Hanoi and Haiphong. Attacks on four locks controlling water levels on supply canals would "exert desirable psychological pressures on both leaders and population" by making them think that raids on the Red River dikes were imminent. Strikes on port facilities would demonstrate American willingness to attack harbor installations regardless of the shipping present.¹¹⁰

The air commanders' plan to mount direct attacks on North Vietnamese morale while also striking war-making capability was consistent with the conduct of past American air campaigns. Such an air pressure strategy paralleled LeMay's World War II fire raids and the attacks on hydroelectric plants and irrigation dams in Korea. Against both the Japanese in World War II and the Communists in Korea, air chiefs had first concentrated on destroying the enemy's capability to fight, believing that wrecking that capacity would lead to a collapse of morale. After finding that bombing aimed specifically at an enemy's war-making capability would not soon yield victory, air commanders had next focused their attacks on both the capability and willingness to fight. Although not stated in the directive, Rolling Thunder 52 was an admission that continued raids on the North's capacity to support the insurgency were insufficient to produce desired results. Wheeler knew that the public, both in the United States and around the world, would discern the significance of raids on power plants, locks, and port facilities. When asked by the President in June 1966 to explain the difference between attacks on POL storage areas and power plants, he had replied that "POL is recognized as a legitimate military target."¹¹¹ The Joint Chiefs sought to drive home precisely that point to Hanoi--that the United States was now willing to strike targets not universally perceived as military fixtures. Rolling Thunder's implied threat to destroy the most valuable economic components of the North Vietnamese nation would

¹¹⁰OK 1966-66, Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 8 November 1966, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 24E, Johnson Library, Box 73.

¹¹¹"National Security Council Meeting," 22 June 1966.

once again guide the air effort, but commanders now intended to give that threat some teeth.

The Joint Chiefs' suggestion to expand Rolling Thunder mirrored the recommendation that Johnson had received from Westmoreland at the Manila Conference in late October.¹¹² After returning to Washington on 2 November, the President left for his Texas ranch two days later.¹¹³ There, in the aftermath of an election that produced sizable Republican gains in Congress, he viewed the chiefs' 8 November proposal. McNamara forwarded the plan without comment so that the President could "receive it as promptly as possible,"¹¹⁴ and Johnson liked what he saw. On 12 November, he authorized Rolling Thunder 32, which increased the number of monthly attack sorties in North Vietnam and Laos to 13,200 and allowed strikes on two power plants, the Haiphong cement plant, and the Thai Nguyen steel factory.¹¹⁵ Several of the targets were inside the Hanoi Prohibited Area, requiring specific approval from the President before pilots could attack them. Still, Johnson, in relative isolation from his military and civilian advisors, accepted his military leaders' recommendation to increase pressure through air power.¹¹⁶

Shortly after the authorization of Rolling Thunder 32, Hanoi seemingly indicated a desire to begin negotiations. Johnson had proposed a "Phase A-Phase B" plan in which he would stop Rolling Thunder (Phase A) provided that Hanoi agreed in

¹¹²Pentagon Papers, Graves edition, 4: 130-31.

¹¹³Presidential Daily Diary, November 1966, Johnson Library.

¹¹⁴Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 8 November 1966, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder ZEE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

¹¹⁵Sharp, Strategy for Defeat, p. 122.

¹¹⁶Johnson returned to Washington on 14 November and entered Bethesda Naval Hospital on the 15th for minor throat and abdominal surgery. He remained at Bethesda until the 19th, when he again departed for Texas.

advance to halt infiltration in key areas (Phase B).¹¹⁷ In late November, the North Vietnamese suggested to the Poles that they would meet with American representatives in Warsaw on 6 December. They failed to show after American aircraft struck a rail-yard near Hanoi on 2 December and a vehicle depot on the 4th. Hanoi had not required a bombing halt as a precondition to the Warsaw discussions, which the President saw as the occasion to establish agreement over his Phase A-Phase B plan.¹¹⁸ He was furious that the North Vietnamese chose not to meet. Because of the Polish announcement that the raids had sabotaged the talks, and the Northern outcry that the attacks had killed civilians, the President curtailed Rolling Thunder 52. He suspended strikes within ten miles of Hanoi, prohibited aircraft from transiting the ten-mile ring, and limited attacks to no more than three new targets a week.¹¹⁹ He had no intention, however, of stopping the air campaign. "I was convinced that the North Vietnamese were not ready to talk with us," he later commented. "The Poles had not only put the cart before the horse, when the time of reckoning came, they had no horse."¹²⁰

The stringent controls on Rolling Thunder remained until early February, when Johnson stopped the campaign on the 8th for the Tet holiday truce. The President used the cessation to write Ho Chi Minh secretly that he would make the pause permanent and freeze the number of American troops in Vietnam as soon as Ho quit sending men and supplies southward. The North Vietnamese had massed three divisions near the 17th parallel, causing Johnson to revamp his phased proposal. The President feared that if he suggested the Phase A-Phase B plan, Ho would agree to it and then send the troops into the South prior to a bombing halt.

¹¹⁷"In other words," William Bundy remembered, "we would give them the idea that the bombing stopped for nothing on the face of things, provided we in fact knew that something was going to happen." See William Bundy interview, 29 May 1969, Tape 4, p. 24.

¹¹⁸Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 251.

¹¹⁹Memorandum from Rostow to the President, "Rolling Thunder 53," 23 January 1967, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 2EE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

¹²⁰Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 252.

Also during the Tet truce, Soviet Premier Alexsei Kosygin visited British Prime Minister Wilson, and the two attempted to mediate a settlement to the war. When Kosygin proposed talks in exchange for a bombing halt, Wilson responded by suggesting the Phase A-Phase B plan. The Prime Minister was unaware that Johnson had written Ho with different terms. Since Wilson's refusal to support the oil raids, the President had not trusted him with any secret information on Vietnam, and the Prime Minister's initiative in proposing what was no longer a valid offer heightened the animosity between the two men.¹²¹ Informed of his mistake, Wilson amended his proposal. The Premier left London on the 12th, and Johnson extended the bombing pause until the Soviet leader arrived in Moscow on the 13th. No further communication came from Kosygin. On the 15th, Ho answered the President's letter. He called Johnson's offer unacceptable, stating that peace talks could not begin until the bombing stopped "definitively and unconditionally."¹²²

Ho's blunt refusal to stop infiltration, the war's slow progress in the South, and the American public's support for the air campaign caused Johnson to order many of the attacks originally approved in Rolling Thunder 32. Westmoreland had launched Operation Cedar Falls, the largest American ground offensive of the war, in January against Communist units in the Iron Triangle near Saigon. Despite killing almost a thousand enemy soldiers, the assault had little impact on the fighting. "Even though the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong followers were suffering one defeat after another," Johnson recalled, "they showed no evidence that they were ready to pull back."¹²³ On 13 February, the day that the President resumed the bombing, a Harris poll showed that 67 percent of the American public supported Rolling Thunder.¹²⁴ After a 21 February review of Vietnam policy options by his civilian advisors, Johnson

¹²¹William Bundy interview, 29 May 1969, Tape 4, pp. 25-27.

¹²²"Ho Chi Minh's Reply," 15 February 1967, in Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 594.

¹²³Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 259.

¹²⁴Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 144.

ordered raids on industrial targets that included the Thai Nguyen steel factory, the Haiphong cement plant, and all thermal power plants except those in Hanoi and Haiphong. He also approved the mining of rivers and estuaries south of the 20th parallel. Ironically, after finally receiving authority to attack many of the North's industrial targets, air commanders found their goal of a systematic campaign foiled by weather. Not until 10 March did aircraft bomb the Thai Nguyen steel complex, and by 21 March monsoons had cancelled all but four of 31 strikes scheduled on the facility.¹²⁵

On 21 March, Hanoi published the letters exchanged between Johnson and Ho Chi Minh during the Tet truce. By revealing its communication with the United States, Hanoi thus assumed some responsibility for the peace effort's failure. In addition, the tone of Johnson's letter was more compromising than Ho's. The President saw the letters' publication as an opportunity to heighten Rolling Thunder's intensity. In January 1967, Sharp had prepared a study outlining what he felt were the North's six basic target systems: electric power, war-supporting industry, transportation support facilities, military complexes, petroleum storage, and air defense.¹²⁶ Following on the heels of the December outcry against the bombing, the admiral's plea that Johnson approve unlimited attacks on all components of a target system fell on deaf ears. After the announcement of the secret correspondence, the President re-examined Sharp's proposal. On 22 March he approved strikes on Haiphong's two thermal power plants, the facilities that Sharp had listed first for attack. The admiral's target list drove Johnson's target selection for much of 1967,¹²⁷ although Sharp's priorities differed little from those of the Joint Chiefs.

Since his November 1966 authorization of Rolling Thunder 32, Johnson had, much like his military leaders, begun to see the air campaign as a means to break the

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹²⁶U. S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, Report on the War in Vietnam (as of 30 June 1968) (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1968), p. 31.

¹²⁷Air War against North Vietnam, part 4, 25 August 1967, p. 293.

North's will to fight. He told NSC members on 8 February 1967 that the bombing would continue "until we get something from the North Vietnamese."¹²⁸ In mid-March, he informed the Tennessee State Legislature that two objectives of Rolling Thunder were to deny the enemy a sanctuary and to exact a penalty for the North's violations of the Geneva Accords.¹²⁹ Yet the President still sought to break Hanoi's will without sacrificing his negative objectives. His desire to portray America as a nation working for peace prevented him from ordering heavy assaults in the aftermath of the aborted Warsaw Conference and while Wilson and Kosygin tried to produce acceptable negotiating terms.

Rolling Thunder's gradually-increasing pace dismayed many members of Congress. Senator John Stennis, Chairman of the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, announced his intention to launch hearings on the conduct of the air war. Knowing that Stennis was sympathetic to the air commanders' desire for a campaign free of political controls, Johnson worked to reduce the conflict between civilian and military leaders. Hanoi's publication of the letters permitted the President to accede to many of his air chiefs' demands. He believed that increased bombing would demonstrate his resolve to fight, and he hoped that it would also weaken Northern morale sufficiently to achieve a favorable peace.

Johnson approved raids on Hanoi's central power station on 8 April. On the 20th, after several weather delays, aircraft attacked Haiphong's thermal power plants. The President also ordered, for the first time in the war, attacks on MiG airfields. American forces struck the Kep and Hoa Lac MiG bases on 24 April, but poor weather prevented the attack on Hanoi's power facility until 19 May. Although pleased with Johnson's expanded targeting, the Joint Chiefs retracted their earlier assertion that raids on power plants would affect "both military and civilian support to the war

¹²⁸"Summary Notes of the 568th NSC Meeting," 8 February 1967, National Security Files, NSC Meetings, Vol. 4, Johnson Library, Box 2.

¹²⁹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 149.

effort."¹³⁰ Wheeler notified the President on 5 May: "The objective of our attacks on the thermal power system in North Vietnam was not . . . to turn the lights off in major population centers, but were [sic] designed to deprive the enemy of a basic power source needed to operate certain war-supporting facilities and industries."¹³¹

The Chairman's remark contradicted the chiefs' original purpose for the raids. Air commanders had decided that direct attacks against both the North's capability and will were necessary. After finally conducting the strikes, Wheeler had second thoughts about admitting their complete objective. His pronouncement mirrored that of the Korean War's General O. P. Weyland, who referred to the raids on North Korean irrigation dams as interdiction efforts to wash out rail embankments. Despite his Army background, Wheeler knew that Air Force doctrine did not condone direct raids on civilians. Further, Air Force doctrine taught that destroying a vital part of the enemy's economy would weaken morale. Yet just as Weyland had difficulty accepting the need to attack North Korean rice, Wheeler had trouble justifying the raids on electric power except in terms of their strict military value. Only with supreme difficulty could he advocate attacks aimed at disrupting morale, and once those attacks occurred, he could critique them only in regards to their effect on combat operations.

For the moment, Johnson resolved Wheeler's dilemma. The 19 May strike on the Hanoi power plant was the last attack of the spring offensive against industry and electric power.

¹³⁰CM 1906-66, 8 November 1966.

¹³¹Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the President, 5 May 1967, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 152.

THE OBJECTIVE WAVES, MAY 1967--MARCH 1968

The May raid on the Hanoi power station occurred in the midst of a vigorous policy debate over the future conduct of the war. In late April, the Joint Chiefs had backed Westmoreland's request for 200,000 additional troops, called for ground assaults into Laos and Cambodia, and urged the President to mine North Vietnamese ports. William Bundy, Rostow, McNaughton, and McNamara opposed such extensions of the war. Bundy argued strongly against mining and recommended no further attacks against "sensitive" targets in the heartland. Rostow, McNaughton, and McNamara proposed a cessation of raids north of the 20th parallel. They believed that Rolling Thunder had destroyed the bulk of important fixed targets and that interdiction would be most effective if confined to the supply flow through the "neck" of the North's logistical funnel.¹³²

Unlike Johnson and the Joint Chiefs, the President's principal civilian advisors no longer perceived Rolling Thunder as a primary means to weaken Northern morale. "Its basic objective " William Bundy declared on 9 May, "[is] to make the total infiltration and supply operation more costly and difficult."¹³³ McNamara could see little value in the air campaign either as an interdiction measure or as a hammer to persuade Hanoi to quit fighting. Yet he also felt that confining Rolling Thunder below the 20th parallel would achieve the lowest possible ceiling on infiltration. Frustrated by the lack of American success in Vietnam, he advised Johnson to seek a compromise peace, and he thought that a bombing cutback would help obtain that goal. "The war in Vietnam is acquiring a momentum of its own that must be stopped," he asserted.

¹³²Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 154, 161-76.

¹³³Memorandum from William Bundy to the President, 9 May 1967, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 2EE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

"Dramatic increases in US troop deployments, in attacks on the North, or in ground actions in Laos and Cambodia are not necessary and are not the answer."¹³⁴

Because of the division between his civilian and military counselors, the President ordered a thorough analysis of Vietnam options. Yielding to his civilian advisors' suggestions, he prohibited further attacks within ten miles of Hanoi. Raids on airfields in the heartland continued, however. The outbreak of the six-day Arab-Israeli War in early June diverted attention from Vietnam, and for the remainder of the month Johnson focused on his meeting with Kosygin in Glassboro, New Jersey.¹³⁵ On 20 July, the President finally announced new directives for combat operations. McNamara had visited Westmoreland to determine the general's exact troop requirements and found that a 200,000-man increase was not essential. As a result, Johnson ordered only an additional 50,000 troops to Vietnam.

In considering Rolling Thunder, the President examined three options: to increase bombing in the Northern heartland, to restrict attacks to below the 20th parallel, and to maintain the campaign's current level of intensity. He chose the last. The new Rolling Thunder directive, number 57, allowed raids on 16 fixed targets in the northeast quadrant as well as extensive interdiction. The restriction on attacks within ten miles of Hanoi remained, despite cries from Sharp and the Joint Chiefs. Johnson's directive satisfied neither his civilian nor military advisors, and was, in effect, "a decision to postpone the issue."¹³⁶ With Stennis' committee scheduled to meet in August, and almost 500,000 troops in Vietnam, he could not justify a significant decrease in the bombing. His negative objectives prevented more extensive attacks, and he was now faced with a growing anti-war protest that was extremely visible and articulate.

¹³⁴Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 19 May 1967, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder ZEE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

¹³⁵At Glassboro, Johnson gave Kosygin the same terms to pass on to Hanoi that he had earlier offered in his letter to Ho. The North Vietnamese did not respond.

¹³⁶Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 196.

While the middle road prevented him from exerting the desired amount of pressure against Hanoi, it helped to assure that he would maintain the support necessary, from both his civilian advisors and the American people, to prosecute the war.

Air commanders exploited the publicity surrounding the Stennis hearings to press their requests for increased bombing. In early August, the Joint Chiefs combined their target list with Sharp's to create an "Operating Target List" of 427 fixed targets.¹³⁷ Of these, aircraft had attacked 239, and the President had prohibited strikes against 138. On 9 August, the opening day of the hearings, the chiefs recommended attacks on 70 of the restricted targets. Johnson knew that commanders such as Sharp and McConnell would use the hearings to vent their displeasure over the air campaign's political controls, and he responded to the chiefs' request by expanding Rolling Thunder 37 authorizations. He approved attacks on 16 additional fixed targets, with six located within the ten-mile Hanoi circle and nine located on the Northeast Railroad inside the Chinese buffer zone. The President continued to remove restrictions, and by mid-September aircraft had struck 40 of the suggested targets.¹³⁸ Speaking of the freedom given to Seventh Air Force to attack the Northeast Railroad, Lieutenant Colonel William H. Greenhalgh observed that "we were finally given carte blanche."¹³⁹ That autonomy resulted in the realization of one of Johnson's great fears. Two fighters raiding the railroad strayed across the Chinese border on 21 August, and Chinese MiGs shot down both aircraft.¹⁴⁰

The China overflight contributed to the President's decision to prohibit further strikes within Hanoi's ten-mile perimeter. Although the Chinese did not

¹³⁷The Joint Chiefs' list contained 242 fixed targets prior to the addition of Sharp's targets.

¹³⁸CM 2650-67, Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 15 September 1967, in Target Study--North Vietnam, AFHRC, file number, K178.2-34.

¹³⁹USAF Oral History Interview of Lieutenant Colonel William H. Greenhalgh by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Eckert, 11 October 1967, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-40, p. 21.

¹⁴⁰Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 198.

increase their military aid to the North, Johnson worried that another incident might trigger direct involvement. In addition, the President had dispatched Dr. Henry A. Kissinger to Paris in response to French indications that the North Vietnamese might negotiate, and Johnson did not want Rolling Thunder to undermine the possibility. Kissinger proposed an end to the bombing if the cessation would "promptly lead" to "productive discussions."¹⁴¹ The offer differed from the previous November's "Phase A-Phase B" advance, for Kissinger stated that the bombing halt would last as long as the North did not "take advantage" of it. Normal military activity in South Vietnam, including resupply, would be allowed to continue until a cease-fire occurred.¹⁴² On 29 September, Johnson publicly announced the terms in a speech to the National Legislative Conference in San Antonio. Four days later, North Vietnam's Communist Party newspaper described the proposal as a "faked desire for peace."¹⁴³ French intermediaries confirmed that Hanoi no longer appeared willing to talk. "The channel was dead," the President reflected. "The door was closed and locked."¹⁴⁴

Kissinger's failure to obtain negotiations led to the intensification of Rolling Thunder. Johnson approved raids on five targets in or near Haiphong on 6 October, and on the 23rd aircraft attacked inside the Hanoi perimeter for the first time in two months. On the 25th they struck Phuc Yen airfield, the primary MiG-21 fighter base and a target frequently recommended by Sharp and the Joint Chiefs. The Phuc Yen raid showed that Johnson's desire to batter Northern morale had begun to override his negative objectives. Three weeks before the attack, he had pointed out that an assault on the airfield would kill 200 Soviet technicians. He had also expressed his concern over the lack of public support for Rolling Thunder.¹⁴⁵ Yet the Phuc Yen raid came

¹⁴¹Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 266.

¹⁴²Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 234.

¹⁴³Quoted in Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 206.

¹⁴⁴Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 268.

¹⁴⁵"President's Meeting with Robin Olds," 2 October 1967, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings, Johnson Library, Box 1.

only four days after 50,000 anti-war protesters staged a dramatic march on the Pentagon.

While they approved of the President's expansion of Rolling Thunder, air commanders argued that it was not enough. "North Vietnam is paying heavily for its aggression and has lost the initiative in the South," the Joint Chiefs informed McNamara, "[but] at our present pace, termination of North Vietnam's military effort is not expected to occur in the near future."¹⁴⁶ On 27 October, the chiefs urged Johnson to reduce the Hanoi "no fly" zone to a three-mile radius. A month later, they asked the President to initiate a four-month campaign against 24 restricted targets. Mining would supplement the effort, and the combination of air and sea interdiction would, the chiefs maintained, increase the hardships imposed on the North. In proposing the four-month program, they asked the President to accept an expected increase in civilian casualties as "justifiable and necessary."¹⁴⁷ McConnell questioned the restrictions on attacking the Northern rice crop, which he saw as a target that would affect the Communists' war-making capacity as well as their will to fight. "My experience is limited to World War II and Korea," he remarked. "In neither of those was there any attempt to preserve the agricultural base, if the targets were required from the standpoint of suppression of their [the enemy's] ability to wage war."¹⁴⁸

McNamara advised Johnson not to expand Rolling Thunder, but the Secretary made little headway against the military's arguments for increased bombing. Since the oil raids in mid-1966, he had questioned the air campaign's military effectiveness, and since the spring of 1967 he had doubted that the United States could accomplish its original political objectives through force. The President, however, remained committed to the goals espoused in NSAM 288, and the vision of an

¹⁴⁶JCSM 355-67, Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 17 October 1967, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 210-11.

¹⁴⁷Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 215.

¹⁴⁸Air War against North Vietnam 22-23 August 1967, part 3, p. 213.

independent, non-Communist South Vietnam still guided the military's planning. Wheeler became a regular member of the Tuesday lunch group in October 1967, assuring that the President received the Joint Chiefs' views firsthand on a weekly basis. Moreover, Westmoreland reported a lack of Communist activity in the South. The general's optimism buoyed Johnson's hopes that the North Vietnamese were finally starting to feel the effects of American military pressure. In the aftermath of Senator Eugene McCarthy's November decision to run for the Presidency as a peace candidate, Westmoreland returned to the United States and defended the administration's conduct of the war. Johnson received further support for the conflict from a special senior advisory group. Consisting of former officials such as Dean Acheson, Robert Murphy, and Douglas Dillon, the group informed the President that continued military force would pressure the North into a favorable settlement.¹⁴⁹ McNamara could not accept that conclusion. Faced with a growing isolation from the mainstream of administration thinking, he decided in November 1967 to resign as Secretary of Defense.¹⁵⁰

Johnson's approval of ten of the Joint Chiefs' 24 recommended targets on 16 December revealed not only McNamara's inability to influence military policy, but also the President's disdain for the Jason Study's second evaluation of Rolling Thunder. Completed at McNamara's request by many of the scientists who participated in the 1966 review, the December 1967 report concluded that North Vietnam's war-fighting capacity had increased because of the bombing. The scientists asserted that Rolling Thunder had caused the North Vietnamese to enhance their transportation system by making it more redundant and eliminating choke points. As long as Hanoi's capability to support Communist forces in the South remained, the Jason Study insisted, bombing could not affect the North's will to fight. The scientists further remarked that they

¹⁴⁹Oral History Interview of Clark M. Clifford by Joe B. Frantz, Bethesda, Maryland, 2-14 July 1969, Johnson Library, Tape 2, pp. 24-25; Tape 3, pp. 4-5.

¹⁵⁰Clark Clifford replaced McNamara as Secretary of Defense at the end of February 1968.

could not devise an air campaign that would reduce the amount of men and goods flowing south.¹⁵¹ Sharp countered the Study's findings with his own evaluation of the air effort. "Although men and material needed for the level of combat now prevailing in South Vietnam continue to flow despite our attacks on LOCs," he conceded, "we have made it very costly to the enemy in terms of material, manpower, management, and distribution."¹⁵² Sharp, the Joint Chiefs, and the President all believed that the high cost inflicted by air power, combined with the Communists' inability to win in the South, would ultimately cause Hanoi to yield to American terms.

By mid-December 1967, Johnson knew that the enemy planned to launch an offensive in the South, and he felt confident that American forces could parry the blow. "The view in the White House was optimistic," Major General Ginsburgh recalled. "We speculated that this might be a go-for-broke campaign and that before the campaign terminated there would be a real possibility for entering into negotiations."¹⁵³ The President considered North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh's public statement on 29 December further proof that conditions were ripe for settlement. Trinh stated that the North would begin discussions with the United States once the bombing stopped, which was a change from his previous comment that talks could begin if the bombing ended.¹⁵⁴ Johnson prohibited raids within five miles of Hanoi on 3 January 1968, and in his State of the Union address on the 17th he encouraged Hanoi to accept his "San Antonio formula" as the basis for peace talks.

On 30 January, one day after the start of the cease-fire for the Tet holiday, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong began their offensive. The assault caught Johnson

¹⁵¹ Jason Study Report, December 1967, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 222-23.

¹⁵² "1967 Progress Report," Message from CINCPAC to the JCS, in Sharp, Strategy for Defeat, p. 302.

¹⁵³ Ginsburgh interview, 26 May 1971, pp. 10-14. Rostow established a White House intelligence evaluation group that first predicted an enemy offensive; the CIA and DIA soon confirmed the Rostow group's assessment.

¹⁵⁴ Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 233.

and his civilian advisors off guard. "We were very surprised when it came during the Tet holidays, which both sides had traditionally reserved as a standdown period," Rusk remembered.¹⁵⁵ The attack's magnitude stunned air commanders. An estimated 70,000 troops struck 36 of the South's 44 provincial capitals and five of its six autonomous cities.¹⁵⁶ Air leaders had consistently maintained that Rolling Thunder limited the scale of Communist ground operations, and the Tet Offensive shattered that conviction. The assault also demonstrated that bombing had not dampened the North's will to fight.

As a result of Rolling Thunder's failure to stymie the enemy's war-making capability, air commanders sought to intensify the attack on Northern morale. The ferocity of the enemy offensive caused Wheeler to overcome his misgivings about striking targets that might produce civilian casualties. At the Tuesday lunch on 6 February, he pleaded with Johnson for permission to attack all targets outside of a three and a half mile radius from the center of Hanoi and a one and a half mile radius from the center of Haiphong. The general noted that the North Vietnamese possessed an excellent air raid warning system that would help keep civilian casualties to a minimum. Yet he further told the President that he was not bothered by civilian losses when comparing them to the Communists' "organized death and butchery" in the South. "All this relates to the matter of pressure," he remarked.¹⁵⁷ Johnson removed the five-mile limit around Hanoi and approved attacks on 14 previously-restricted targets, but he did not give Wheeler authority to attack additional targets without his approval. The Chairman continued to press for raids to weaken Northern will. On 19 March, he proposed striking the Haiphong docks, located near a large concentration of the city's

¹⁵⁵Rusk interview, 15 July 1985.

¹⁵⁶Dave Richard Palmer, Summons of the Trumpet (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), pp. 186-87.

¹⁵⁷"Notes of the President's Tuesday Luncheon Meeting," 6 February 1968, President's Appointment File, Johnson Library, Box 89.

inhabitants.¹⁵⁸ The President rejected the suggestion. By this time, he had grave doubts that military pressure would achieve his goals in Vietnam.

At the end of February, Johnson had asked Clark M. Clifford, his new Secretary of Defense, to review Vietnam policy options. Clifford started the analysis convinced that increased force was the proper response to the Tet Offensive. The belief proved transitory. Westmoreland had requested an additional 200,000 men to thwart the Communist assault, but the Joint Chiefs could not give Clifford a precise time when the attrition of enemy forces would become "unbearable."¹⁵⁹ In addition, Clifford and his assistants determined that a significant increase in bombing could not affect the North's war-making capability. They observed that the only purpose of intensifying Rolling Thunder "would be to endeavor to break the will of the North Vietnamese leaders," a prospect that they thought had little chance of success even if the United States attempted deliberate strikes on population centers or the Red River dikes. Besides failing to destroy Northern morale, such measures would, they contended, alienate allied and domestic support for the war and heighten the risk of superpower intervention.¹⁶⁰ The dismal prospects for military success either on the ground or through the air caused Clifford to resummon the senior policy advisors who had counseled Johnson in November 1967. Meeting at the White House on 18 and 19 March, most of the officials now advocated a withdrawal from Vietnam.¹⁶¹ Clifford concurred.

The second "Wisemen" meeting closely followed domestic and political crises for the President and had a major impact on his willingness to continue the war. On 10 March, the New York Times reported Westmoreland's request for 200,000 more troops, adding to the popular outcry against the war fueled by the Tet Offensive. Three days

¹⁵⁸Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 268.

¹⁵⁹Clifford interview, 2 July 1969, Tape 2, pp. 25-26.

¹⁶⁰Clifford Working Group Memorandum, 3 March 1968, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 239-52.

¹⁶¹Clifford interview, 14 July 1969, Tape 3, p. 5.

later, Johnson narrowly defeated McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary, and on the 16th Senator Robert Kennedy, Johnson's primary political foe, announced his candidacy in the Presidential race. The events of March 1968 starkly demonstrated that Johnson's nagging fear had become a reality--he had lost the public support necessary to prosecute the war. Clifford's about-face and the senior advisors' consensus tipped the scales against applying additional military force in Vietnam.¹⁶² In a 31 March television address, the President announced that aircraft would no longer bomb the North, except in the area directly north of the 17th parallel where enemy build-ups threatened American and South Vietnamese forces. To help assure that the unilateral action led to negotiations, he stated that he would devote his remaining time in office to peace efforts and that he would not seek re-election.

The trauma of March 1968 combined with the shock of the Tet Offensive and caused Johnson to abandon his attempt to create an independent, stable, non-Communist South Vietnam through the application of military power. His hope for a non-Communist South remained, but after 31 March he did not believe that he could achieve that goal by pressuring the North with limited military force. The realization was a painful process that occurred slowly. He later noted: "When did I make the decisions that I announced on the evening of March 31, 1968? The answer is: 9:01 P. M. on March 31, 1968."¹⁶³ The failure to stop Communist aggression made achieving the President's positive political objective problematic; an independent, non-Communist South could exist only if it could prevent a Communist takeover, and without continued American military assistance, the South's survival was unlikely.

Johnson thus provided his successor with a dilemma, and that dilemma formed the basis of America's revamped war aims. On the one hand, the lack of public

¹⁶²Townsend Hoopes, Johnson's Under Secretary of the Air Force, maintains that Clifford's dissatisfaction with the war was the key reason for the President's March decision to de-escalate. See Hoopes' The Limits of Intervention (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1969).

¹⁶³Johnson, Vantage Point, p. 423.

support for the war compelled the President to remove American forces from Vietnam. On the other hand, he still sought to preserve a non-Communist South. Fittingly, Johnson provided the label for these twin goals. "Let men everywhere know," he concluded his 31 March address, "that a strong, a confident, and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to achieve an honorable peace."¹⁶⁴

In attempting to achieve "peace with honor," Richard M. Nixon would place a large measure of faith in air power.

¹⁶⁴Quoted in Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 275.

CHAPTER IV

ROLLING THUNDER: RESTRAINTS AND RESULTS

We are considering air action against the North as the means to a limited objective--the improvement of our bargaining position with the North Vietnamese. At the same time we are sending signals to the North Vietnamese that our limited purpose is to persuade them to stop harassing their neighbors, that we do not seek to bring down the Hanoi regime or to interfere with the independence of Hanoi.

George W. Ball, 5 October 1964¹

It is within our power to give much more drastic warnings to Hanoi than any we have yet given. If General Eisenhower is right in his belief that it was the prospect of nuclear attack which brought an armistice in Korea, we should at least consider what realistic threat of larger action is available to us for communication to Hanoi.

McGeorge Bundy, 30 June 1965²

A variety of controls limited the bombing of North Vietnam. While President Lyndon Johnson's much-publicized political restrictions were the most obvious limitation on the campaign, military and operational restrictions also confined the air effort. These controls reduced bombing's military effectiveness, and hence its efficacy as a political instrument. The air campaign did not significantly lessen the North's capability to fight, nor did it weaken Hanoi's willingness to continue the war.

Rolling Thunder's inability to achieve decisive results did not stem entirely from the controls placed on it. Of equal importance to the restrictions was the failure of civilian and military leaders to appreciate the type of warfare waged by the enemy.

¹George W. Ball, "How Valid Are the Assumptions underlying our Viet-Nam Policies?" 5 October 1964, *The Atlantic* 230 (July 1972), p. 38.

²Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to the Secretary of Defense, 30 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 6, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, Box 43.

Despite frequently stating that the Communists conducted guerrilla warfare, both groups assumed that the destruction of resources necessary for conventional conflict would weaken the enemy's capability and will to fight unconventionally. The United States had never opposed a guerrilla foe in the nuclear era, and memories of unconventional conflicts in the Philippines and Latin America had faded in the aftershock of Hiroshima. America had also fought only one limited war in the atomic age. Air commanders in the early 1950s considered Korea an aberration and prepared for global conflict with the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, civilian leaders saw the Soviets retreat in Cuba from the threat of American air power. The absence of limited war experience in an unconventional environment combined with smug self-assurance and led to a misplaced faith in Rolling Thunder. Instead of facilitating victory, the air power convictions of civilian and military chiefs served as blinders obscuring the true image of the Vietnam War.

CONTROLS ON ROLLING THUNDER

POLITICAL CONTROLS

Johnson's controls on the air campaign flowed from his negative political objectives. The goals of avoiding Soviet or Chinese intervention, preserving the Great Society, securing a favorable American image overseas, and maintaining the support of Western allies caused him to keep a tight rein on Rolling Thunder. Although he periodically relaxed his controls, the President remained constantly alert for signs that Rolling Thunder threatened the accomplishment of his negative aims. By restricting weaponry, targets, and sortie rates, he tried to fashion an air campaign that would hurt North Vietnam without provoking external observers.

Armament limitations included both a ban on nuclear weapons and the restricted employment of B-52 bombers. Neither Johnson nor the Joint Chiefs seriously

considered using the atomic bomb against the North. To do so would have invited the nuclear exchange that the President feared; further, air leaders found no targets worthy of atomic ordnance. They proposed sending B-52s, with 30-ton loads of conventional "iron" bombs, against marshalling yards and airfields.³ Despite dispatching additional bombers to the Pacific in early 1965, Johnson hesitated to send them across the 17th parallel. He believed that B-52 attacks on the North would appear too provocative, plus he wanted to avoid losses to a major component of America's nuclear deterrent.⁴ In mid-June 1965, he permitted bomber raids in the South, and the "Arc Light" campaign of B-52 close air support soon became a regular feature of the Southern war. Not until 1966 did Johnson order the bombers northward. They flew only 141 Rolling Thunder missions, and most occurred near the demilitarized zone.⁵ B-52s did, however, attack Haiphong's oil storage facilities in April 1967.

Controls on targets also limited the air effort. American jets did not attack the enemy "heartland" north of the 20th parallel until late 1965. Johnson restricted raids against Hanoi, Haiphong, and targets adjacent to the Chinese border, although the limitations varied in severity. Unless they secured the President's approval through the Joint Chiefs, air commanders could not attack targets within a 30-mile radius from the center of Hanoi, a 10-mile radius from the center of Haiphong, and within 30 miles of China. These "Restricted Area" controls remained in effect for the duration of Rolling Thunder. In December 1966, Johnson established "Prohibited Areas" around Hanoi and Haiphong. These were zones where no attacks--or overflights--were possible. The Prohibited Area restrictions fluctuated according to Johnson's

³The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam, Senator Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Vol. 3: 209, 333-34.

⁴Memorandum from General Andrew Goodpaster to the President, "Meeting with General Eisenhower," 12 October 1965, National Security Files, Name File: President Eisenhower, Johnson Library, Box 3.

⁵Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, eds., The Air War in Indochina (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 44.

temperament and the seriousness of American negotiating efforts. For most of 1967, the zones were a 10-mile circle around the center of Hanoi and a four-mile circle around Haiphong.⁶

Besides determining where his pilots could attack, the President decided how often they could do so. By assigning targets in weekly, or bi-weekly, increments, he assured that the campaign would intensify gradually. Johnson also stopped Rolling Thunder completely on eight different occasions between March 1965 and March 1968. His reasons for the cessations varied. In May 1965, he halted the campaign for six days as "a propaganda effort" to demonstrate that he sought a peaceful solution to the war.⁷ The attempt to negotiate was not genuine, unlike bids made in December 1965 and February 1967 in concert with respective bombing pauses of 37 and six days. Johnson stopped Rolling Thunder briefly during both Christmas and New Year's in 1966 and 1967, and for 24 hours on Buddha's birthday in May 1967.

Conditions in South Vietnam further affected the air campaign's tempo. The President refused to start bombing in December 1964 or February 1965 while coups immobilized the Saigon government. Likewise, he hesitated to attack oil storage facilities while Buddhist protesters challenged Premier Nguyen Cao Ky's authority in spring 1966. Johnson had initially intended Rolling Thunder to be a joint operation by American and South Vietnamese air forces. The difficulty of coordinating with Southern leaders,⁸ and the lack of sophisticated South Vietnamese aircraft and highly-trained pilots, caused him in March 1965 to drop the requirement for Southern

⁶Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 233.

⁷In an 18 December 1965 meeting with Johnson and his principal civilian advisors, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara stated that the May pause "was a propaganda effort--not for the Soviets to help [negotiate]." No one challenged this explanation. See "12:35 P. M. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Bombing Pause," 18 December 1965, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1.

⁸Message, Maxwell Taylor to George Ball, 3 June 1965, National Security Files, INSC History: Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 4, Johnson Library, Box 41.

participation. The qualification restricted operations during Rolling Thunder's first two weeks, the period when the President's civilian advisors had the most faith in its success.

In addition to announced bombing controls, Johnson and his civilian counselors indirectly limited Rolling Thunder. Concerns other than Vietnam reduced the attention that civilian leaders could devote to the air campaign, and Tuesday lunch decision-making sometimes blurred the intentions of the President and his advisors. At the end of April 1965, an attempted coup in the Dominican Republic compelled Johnson to focus on the Caribbean when Rolling Thunder was not yet two months old. Determined to forestall the establishment of a second Communist regime in the Western Hemisphere, he dispatched 22,000 troops to the country. The Dominican crisis continued until early June and prevented Johnson from giving careful thought to his May decision to stop Rolling Thunder temporarily.⁹ The Arab-Israeli War in June 1967, followed by the Glassboro Summit later that month, also diverted the President's attention from Vietnam. After having asked for a review of Vietnam policy options in May 1967, he delayed his response to bombing proposals until late July. The North Korean capture of the American intelligence ship Pueblo on 23 January 1968--seven days prior to the Tet Offensive--distracted Johnson and his advisors from Vietnam and heightened the surprise of the Communist assault. Instead of sending reserve ground and air units to Southeast Asia to oppose the attack, he ordered reserves to Korea to bolster American forces there.

The President made many of his foreign policy decisions, including those concerning Rolling Thunder, during his Tuesday White House luncheons. The lunch group met roughly 160 times between 1964 and 1968, although the frequency of meetings was erratic. After a 9 March 1965 session, Johnson convened Tuesday lunches

⁹Oral History Interview of William Bundy by Page E. Mullohan, 29 May 1969, Johnson Library, Tape 2, p. 27.

for 11 consecutive weeks, and he relied on them often in August and September. In the first 20 weeks of 1966, the lunch group met only six times, but after December 1966 the luncheons occurred an average of four out of every five weeks.¹⁰ Johnson preferred the lunch sessions to National Security Council (NSC) meetings because they lessened the chance that secret material might leak to the press. "In effect, the Tuesday luncheons were NSC meetings--the key participants of the NSC were present," reflected Secretary of State Dean Rusk. "The luncheon format allowed complete candor; there was nobody sitting in chairs along the wall. We knew what was said wouldn't be in The Washington Post the next day."¹¹

While permitting candor, the luncheons did not guarantee clarity. Only Johnson's principal advisors attended the gatherings and they did not publish the sessions' results.¹² William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, described the Tuesday lunch as "an abomination."¹³ He recalled that after a luncheon he would telephone his counterpart at the Defense Department, Assistant Secretary John T. McNaughton, to discuss what each thought were the decisions made at the session. Different perceptions were frequent. Benjamin Read, the State Department's executive secretary, noted that occasionally after talking with Rusk and National Security Advisor Walt W. Rostow, "you would think that they had attended separate lunches."¹⁴

The information that air chiefs received from the Tuesday luncheons was sometimes incorrect and often caused confusion. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara informed Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Rolling Thunder's operational

¹⁰David C. Humphrey, "Tuesday Lunch at the Johnson White House: A Preliminary Assessment," Diplomatic History 8 (Winter 1984), pp. 82-89.

¹¹Interview of Dean Rusk by the author, Athens, Georgia, 15 July 1985.

¹²Chester L. Cooper, The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1970), p. 414.

¹³William Bundy interview, 2 June 1969, Tape 5, pp. 12-13.

¹⁴Quoted in Humphrey, p. 98.

commander, on 10 May 1965 that the bombing would stop for several days "in order to observe [the] reaction of DRV [Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam] rail and road transportation systems."¹⁵ The Secretary did not mention that Johnson intended the interlude as a ploy to demonstrate his willingness to negotiate. When the bombing resumed, the lunch group produced a definition of "acceptable" interdiction targets that baffled air commanders. Pilots learned that they had authority to strike moving targets such as convoys and troops, but that they could not attack highways, railroads, or bridges unless moving traffic appeared on the structures.¹⁶ Moreover, the precise meaning of "moving targets" was unclear to those executing Rolling Thunder. A wing commander in Thailand displayed his confusion over permissible interdiction targets to 2nd Air Division Headquarters in Saigon:

What is a military convoy? How many vehicles constitute a convoy? When a specified number of vehicles covers what length of road is it a convoy? Is a single vehicle travelling by itself an authorized target? . . . Targets on a "truckable ancillary road" are listed as a target. How far off of a specified route are we authorized to follow a truckable ancillary road? "Troops" are listed as targets. The difficulty of recognizing groups of civilians on the ground from troops is readily apparent. I recognize this as my problem but believe that it can be better defined.¹⁷

The air commanders' failure to receive precise information from the Tuesday lunch group stemmed partly from its lack of a military representative. Until late 1967, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle G. Wheeler did not regularly participate in the sessions. General Wheeler believed that the President harbored suspicions of military parochialism, and that those notions prevented Johnson from

¹⁵Message from the Secretary of State to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 10 May 1965, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 367.

¹⁶US Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, Air War against North Vietnam, 90th Cong., 1st sess., part 5, 27-29 August 1967, p. 478.

¹⁷Message, 190935Z May 1965 from 41st ADIV ADVON to 2 AD CP, in PACAF outgoing Messages, 3 April-24 December 1965, Air Force Historical Research Center (herein referred to as AFHRC), Maxwell AFB, Alabama, file number K717.1623. "Pending more definitive guidance from headquarters," the wing commander defined a convoy as "three or more internal combustion vehicles going the same direction on not more than a one mile segment of a specified route."

initially inviting him to the Tuesday lunches.¹⁸ Whatever the reason, the President omitted him from not only from the Tuesday sessions, but also from other decision-making forums. Wheeler did not attend the three cabinet room meetings in December 1965 in which Johnson and his civilian advisors discussed the merits of a bombing halt.¹⁹ In January 1967, the President formed a special committee to examine Vietnam planning. Its members gathered on Thursdays, evaluating Rolling Thunder and Vietnamization. Air Force Major General Robert N. Ginsburgh, Wheeler's representative to the NSC, soon learned of the meetings, but "was specifically prohibited from informing the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of their existence." Wheeler remained unaware of the committee for two months, when Johnson finally allowed him to participate in it.²⁰

Until the spring of 1967, the President relied extensively on his civilian advisors in Rolling Thunder decision-making. Uncertain of himself in foreign affairs, he trusted the judgments of those possessing strong foreign policy credentials. He retained this faith in his counselors during the target selection process. McNamara, Rusk and respective National Security Advisors McGeorge Bundy and Rostow formed the core of Johnson's brain-trust. Their targeting suggestions did not always conform to the Joint Chiefs' proposals. Major General Gilbert L. Meyers, 7th Air Force Deputy Commander, noted that many of the targets assigned during 1966 were abandoned

¹⁸Oral History Interview of Earle G. Wheeler by Dorothy Pierce McSweeney, Washington, DC, 21 August 1969, Johnson Library, Tape 1, p. 12.

¹⁹"Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam," 17 December 1965; "12:35 P. M. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Bombing Pause," 18 December 1965; "Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors," 21 December 1965, in Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1.

²⁰USAF Oral History Interview of Major General Robert N. Ginsburgh by Colonel John E. Van Dwyne and Major Richard B. Clement, 26 May 1971, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-477, pp. 65-66. The group was known as the "no committee" because of the President's wish to limit talk about another formal committee. Directed by Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, its members included McNamara, Rusk, Rostow, McNaughton, and William Bundy.

complexes built by the French.²¹ Lieutenant Colonel William H. Greenhalgh, Deputy Director of Targets for 7th Air Force Intelligence, recalled that a message arrived from Washington in late 1966 asking why 7th Air Force had not attacked a missile propellant storage area near Hanoi. The intelligence officers responded that they knew of no such facility, and received word that the building appeared on film taken during a particular photographic reconnaissance mission. The officers scrutinized the film but failed to find the structure. After again reporting their lack of success, they were directed to examine specific coordinates on a single frame of the film. They enlarged the frame and found only a small village, typical of others in the area, with a long storage building. No roads, railroads, or waterways led to the hamlet, Greenhalgh remembered, "so we could not figure out how anyone could have thought there was any significant military target in the village." Greenhalgh briefed his predicament to General John D. Ryan, the Commander of Pacific Air Forces, who was in Saigon on an inspection. Ryan took the briefing calmly, and replied only, "Bomb it." Seventh Air Force fighters then attacked the structure, "but the pilots could not pick out which village they were to bomb and laid their bombs on the best they could figure out. From the bomb damage assessment photographs we were able to show the pilots which village they were to bomb, and the next mission wiped it out. There was no sign of missile propellant or anything else of military value."²² During the whole of 1966, Johnson approved only 22 of the Joint Chiefs' recommended targets.²³

The strained rapport between the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was a further indirect control on Rolling Thunder. To guarantee that Johnson received the Joint Chiefs' views, Wheeler often sent McNamara memorandums

²¹ Air War against North Vietnam, part 5, 27-29 August 1967, p. 478.

²² Letter from Lieutenant Colonel William H. Greenhalgh to the author, 4 April 1987. Emphasis added.

²³ Air War against North Vietnam, part 5, 27-29 August 1967, p. 478. Poor weather also contributed to the low total of fixed targets struck.

with a request to forward the correspondence to the President. The Secretary complied with the Chairman's appeals,²⁴ but he did not always forcefully present the chiefs' views during meetings with Johnson. McNamara told the President that the military's opposition to a December 1965 bombing pause was "baloney," and stated that he could "take on the chiefs."²⁵ He rarely notified military leaders before arguing against the suggestions they sent to Johnson.²⁶ Such action led Wheeler to write at the end of his November 1966 proposal for Rolling Thunder 52: "I recommend the following: (a) that President Johnson be briefed in the immediate future on RT [Rolling Thunder] 52 so that his early approval on the program can be obtained; and (b) that I be present in order to explain the photography and RT 52 and to respond to any questions the President might have."²⁷

By the fall of 1966, Wheeler knew that McNamara had lost faith in Rolling Thunder. Yet the Chairman continued to present his case for increased bombing through the Secretary rather than by going directly to Johnson. In his capacity as top military advisor, Wheeler had the right to express his views firsthand to the President. He chose instead to tender his opinions strictly within the confines of the chain-of-command.²⁸ Wheeler and his counterparts were pleased, however, when Johnson made him a regular member of the Tuesday lunch group. "The JCS was much more comfortable in having their case made by their own colleague," recalled Rostov, who helped persuade the President to add the general to the sessions.²⁹

²⁴Ginsburgh interview, 26 May 1971, pp. 74-75.

²⁵"Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam," 17 December 1965; "12:35 P. M. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Bombing Pause," 18 December 1965.

²⁶Oral History Interview of General John P. McConnell by Dorothy Pierce McSweeney, Washington, DC, 14, 28 August 1969, Johnson Library, Tape 1, p. 38.

²⁷CM 1906-66, Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 8 November 1966, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder ZEE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

²⁸Ginsburgh interview, 26 May 1971, p. 74.

²⁹Interview of Walt W. Rostov by the author, Austin, Texas, 23 May 1986.

As the war progressed, Johnson's civilian advisors became less able to provide him with sound recommendations. The demands of the conflict became a grim routine that tended to stifle original thought. Observed White House staff member Chester Cooper:

The problem was that there was no time or opportunity for quiet conversation or even for quiet contemplation. Exhausted, harassed, besieged men found it necessary to concentrate on tactics rather than strategy, on micro-problems rather than macro-solutions, on today's crises rather than tomorrow's opportunities. New bombing target "packages" rather than diplomatic or political initiatives tended to be the typical menu for the President's "Tuesday Lunch." Someone once said as he watched the Secretary of State dashing off to the White House, "If you told him right now of a sure-fire way to defeat the Viet Cong and to get out of Vietnam, he would groan that he was too busy to worry about that now; he had to discuss next week's bombing targets."³⁰

Although Johnson's reliance on his civilian advisors ebbed during Rolling Thunder, he never completely disregarded their recommendations. The intimate atmosphere of the Tuesday lunch heightened the counselors' influence on Johnson. After the December 1965 pause suggested by his advisors failed to produce peace, the President listened less to their proposals.³¹ Still, he refused to order the oil storage attacks in mid-1966 until a consensus of both civilian and military leaders recommended the strikes. McNamara's influence waned once he lost faith in America's ability to win the war. Johnson then frequently turned to Rostow,³² who shared the President's belief in early 1967 that more bombing would pay dividends. Gradually, however, other advisors joined McNamara's ranks. By March 1968, Johnson found that most of his counselors no longer supported the war. Despite the Joint Chiefs' call for more extensive air attacks, the President needed more than the backing of his military leaders to expand the conflict. Without his civilian advisors' endorsement, he doubted that he could win in Vietnam.

³⁰Cooper, p. 420.

³¹William Dundy interview, 29 May 1969, Tape 3, p. 24; Oral History Interview of Clark M. Clifford by Joe B. Franz, Bethesda, Maryland, 2 July 1969, Tape 2, p. 20.

³²Clifford interview, 15 December 1969, Tape 5, pp. 20-21.

In the final analysis, Johnson was himself an indirect control on Rolling Thunder. His frequent absences from Washington hampered both civilian and military chiefs who sought to implement new bombing policies. In early October 1965, he entered Bethesda Naval Hospital for gall bladder surgery, remained there two weeks, and then spent eight of 1965's remaining ten weeks at his Texas ranch. While in Texas, he ordered the December bombing pause on the night of the 27th without any prior notice.³³ The President spent most of November and December 1966 at the ranch, where in mid-November he approved the Joint Chiefs' proposal for Rolling Thunder 52. William Bundy considered the Texas trips "a significant impediment in the way of government" because they prevented Johnson's advisors from meeting with him face-to-face.³⁴ The absences disrupted the Tuesday lunch targeting process, which sometimes resulted in the failure to update the approved list of targets.

While significant, Johnson's departures from Washington were not his most telling control on the air campaign. Perhaps more than any other factor, the President's ego limited Rolling Thunder. He saw himself in the image of Franklin Roosevelt³⁵--as a leader who could provide the nation with guns and butter. Unlike Roosevelt, Johnson could not do both, yet he was unwilling to surrender either goal. His commitment to the Great Society clashed with his conviction that he would not be the first President to lose a war. The conflicting desires stymied his ability to make a hard decision about either concern. "No President, at least not this President, makes a decision until he publicly announces that decision and acts upon it," he reflected.³⁶ Throughout the three years of Rolling Thunder, Johnson's major declaration of

³³William Bundy interview, 29 May 1969, Tape 3, p. 17.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 13-14. Original emphasis.

³⁵Johnson placed Roosevelt's portrait on the wall across from his chair in the cabinet room. See Henry Graff, The Tuesday Cabinet (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 57.

³⁶Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969 (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1971), p. 423.

bombing objectives came on 31 March 1968--when he voiced his intention to curtail the campaign to induce negotiations.

MILITARY CONTROLS

Although less obvious than political restraints, military controls limited Rolling Thunder's effectiveness. Foremost among the military limitations was Air Force strategic bombing doctrine. As a result of Air Corps Tactical School instruction, World War II experience, and postwar planning, that doctrine stressed destroying an enemy's capability to fight through attacks on its economic vital centers. Air chiefs equated economic viability to industrial prowess. They believed that the destruction of production centers and their means of distribution would guarantee the loss of war-fighting capacity. The emphasis on industry stemmed from several factors: the major belligerents in World War II had relied extensively on their industrial might to wage war; the Soviet Union, the expected enemy of the next war, was an industrial power; and--perhaps most important--air leaders knew the value of industry to their own nation's war-fighting capability. Moreover, they knew that the manufacture and distribution of goods were essential facets of American society. They assumed that any opponent would place a high premium on preserving what they perceived not only as necessary components for modern war, but also as fundamental features of twentieth-century social order.³⁷

Largely because of these beliefs, air planners designed a campaign to wreck North Vietnam's industrial capacity. They realized that the North possessed a meager industrial base heavily supplemented by imports. Yet, in their eyes, the overall lack of technological sophistication increased the value of the North's miniscule industry.

³⁷ As a rationale for raids on power plants, the Joint Chiefs stated that the attacks would have "significant sociological and psychological effects" on the North Vietnamese populace. See Annex A to Appendix A of JCSM 811-65, Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 7 December 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, JCS Memorandums, Vol. 2, Johnson Library, Box 193.

They contended that its destruction would disrupt the Northern economy to such a degree that Hanoi could no longer support the Viet Cong. "Stepped-up interdiction efforts against DRV target systems would significantly affect industrial and commercial activity in the DRV and place in serious jeopardy the viability of the nonagricultural sector of the North Vietnamese economy," the Joint Chiefs informed McNamara at the end of August 1965.³⁸ This perception endured until the 1968 Tet Offensive. It caused the chiefs to argue for attacks on oil storage facilities, cement and steel factories, and electric power plants in addition to raids on the transportation system.

The air leaders' conviction that industrial targets were the proper objectives for an air campaign led them to shun attacks on irrigation dams and the Red River dikes. North Vietnam possessed 91 waterway locks and dams, but the Joint Chiefs targeted only eight of the structures.³⁹ The chiefs suggested attacking the eight to disrupt traffic on inland waterways, although in November 1966 Wheeler noted that raids on four locks would also "exert desirable psychological pressures on both leaders and population."⁴⁰ The chiefs never formally proposed attacks on the Red River dikes, which Lieutenant Colonel Greenhalgh thought were the North's most lucrative targets.⁴¹ The North Vietnamese had built extensive dikes along the river's banks to prevent it from flooding and to channel water to rice crops. Bisected by the river, Hanoi lay 20 feet below its surface during monsoon seasons.⁴² Other cities in the delta were similarly vulnerable to flooding. While Air Force Chief of Staff John P. McConnell

³⁸Appendix C to JCSM 613-65, Memorandum from the Chairman, JCS, to the Secretary of Defense, 27 August 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder ZEE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

³⁹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition.

⁴⁰CM 1906-66, 8 November 1966.

⁴¹Ginsburgh interview, 26 May 1971; Interview of Lieutenant Colonel William H. Greenhalgh by the author, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 17 May 1985.

⁴²Jon M. Van Dyke, North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1972), p. 184. A dam burst in 1945, killing between one and a half and two million people.

later commented that attacks against the dikes would have been "a pretty fruitless operation," Ginsburgh maintained that B-52 raids during high-water periods would have destroyed the structures.⁴³ Wheeler provided an additional reason why air leaders never recommended attacking the dikes. "We tried to be sensible men," he remarked in 1969.⁴⁴

The desire to conduct a "sensible" air campaign complemented the accepted tenets of strategic bombing doctrine and further limited Rolling Thunder. General Ira Eaker's 1943 admonition against "throwing the strategic bomber at the man in the street" lingered in the minds of air commanders.⁴⁵ Besides demonstrating the efficacy of air power, they hoped to show that bombing could be effective without being wanton. The Joint Chiefs' 94-target scheme aimed to destroy Northern industrial assets with a brief display of selective bombing; the raids would shock Hanoi's leaders not by killing civilians, but by rapidly eliminating the means to fight. "We advocated, militarily, that we should undertake the most sizable effort that we could against remunerative targets, excluding populations for targets. None of us believed in that at all," reflected Wheeler.⁴⁶ The Chairman was especially sensitive to the prospect of civilian casualties. While advocating strikes against electric power plants, he pressed for the raids only after attacks against "strictly military" targets had produced marginal results.⁴⁷

The air leaders' concern for civilian casualties resembled that displayed in previous American air campaigns. In both World War II and Korea, bombing began against targets that were, for the most part, removed from populated areas. As fighting continued without signs that the enemy would yield, air leaders reluctantly ordered

⁴³McConnell interview, 14, 28 August 1969, Tape 1, p. 21; Ginsburgh interview, 26 May 1971, p. 49.

⁴⁴Wheeler interview, 21 August 1969, Tape 1, p. 17.

⁴⁵See Chapter I, p. 9.

⁴⁶Wheeler interview, 21 August 1969, Tape 1, pp. 24-25.

⁴⁷See Chapter III, pp. 141-42.

direct strikes on war-making capability and civilian morale. Such was the case in Vietnam. Air chiefs realized by August 1965 that Johnson was not going to implement the 94-target plan. They then advocated attacks on the transportation system and oil storage facilities, the two industrial components that they perceived as most important to the Northern war effort. Not until after the oil strikes did air leaders clamor for raids against electric power plants. Their entreaties indicated a changing perception of how Rolling Thunder could best accomplish its military objectives. From late 1966 on, they intended to make the North's civilian populace wince from the destruction of military targets. Air leaders hesitantly adopted this aim, however. Wheeler's assessment of the attacks on electric power revealed the uncertainty that many felt about attacking morale.⁴⁸ The fury of the Tet Offensive caused air chiefs to overcome their misgivings about striking near populated areas. Still, they refused to advocate direct attacks on North Vietnamese civilians.

To some extent, the shift in bombing emphasis from transportation to oil to electric power resulted from the Joint Chiefs' efforts to propose targets acceptable to Johnson. "The fact that we were able to sell the POL [Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants] system made us feel that perhaps the next thing would be to sell the thermal power system," remembered Colonel Henry H. Edelen, a member of Wheeler's staff who reviewed target suggestions.⁴⁹ Yet the changing priorities were much more than alternatives randomly selected after attacks against a particular target system proved indecisive. The chiefs' proposals revealed their twin desires to destroy the North's industrial base and to cause minimal loss of life to its civilian population. These goals prevented them from suggesting raids that would have had a more telling effect on the North's capability to fight.

⁴⁸See Chapter III, pp. 146-47.

⁴⁹USAF Oral History Interview of Colonel Henry Edelen by Major Samuel E. Riddlebarger and Lieutenant Colonel S. Bissell, 27 January 1970, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-243, p. 57.

Besides doctrinal and moral considerations, the military's organizational arrangements for Rolling Thunder limited the air campaign. Wheeler proposed targets to McNamara after a "Rolling Thunder Team" of seven officers reviewed recommendations arriving from Admiral Sharp's Pacific Command (PACOM) headquarters. Before May 1965, this team comprised two individuals, and neither was a pilot or an Air Force officer.⁵⁰ Despite serving as Rolling Thunder's operational commander, Sharp exercised little overall control from his Honolulu office. He allowed his chief subordinates, the Commander of Pacific Fleet (PACFLT), and the Commander of Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), to direct the air units of their respective services.

The absence of a single air commander produced chaos. Second Air Division in Saigon, the Air Force headquarters with direct control over fighter wings participating in the campaign, received guidance not only from PACOM and PACAF, but also from 13th Air Force in the Philippines. Meanwhile, the Navy's Carrier Task Force (CTF) 77 in the Tonkin Gulf received supervision from PACOM and PACFLT. To reduce the multi-layered Air Force command arrangement, PACAF changed 2nd Air Division to 7th Air Force in early 1966. The confusion then increased, however. Instead of providing 7th Air Force with complete control over 2nd Air Division assets, PACAF gave 7th Air Force "operational" direction over the fighter wings, while 13th Air Force retained "administrative" control.⁵¹ The ultimate result of this bizarre arrangement was the creation of 7/13th Air Force in Thailand, which then assumed administrative control of the fighters! "Command arrangements were a mess," reflected a Seventh Air Force staff officer. "There was only one person that you could say was in command, and that was the President."

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 15-26.

⁵¹"Operational" control was the direction of combat activities, while "administrative" control was the direction of personnel. The latter included management of assignments, promotions, leaves, etc.

The lack of a single air commander further prevented military chiefs from integrating Rolling Thunder with other air efforts in Southeast Asia. Besides bombing North Vietnam, American fighter squadrons raided the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos in Operation "Steel Tiger." In Operation "Barrel Roll," they provided close air support for Laotian government forces battling the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in northern Laos. By far, pilots flew the largest number of sorties in support of friendly ground troops in South Vietnam. American aircraft dropped 2,200,000 tons of bombs on the South between 1965 and 1968, compared to 600,000 tons dropped on the North.⁵²

A dearth of interservice cooperation also constrained Rolling Thunder. Navy air units vied with Air Force squadrons for higher sortie totals against the North. "Putting it bluntly, it was a competition," commented 2nd Air Division Commander Lieutenant General Joseph H. Moore. Moore objected to efforts to divide North Vietnam into specific zones for separate Air Force and Navy attacks. "I resisted this quite bitterly for a long time," he recalled, "because it ended up with us [the Air Force] going to be up around the highly defended areas, and I thought we ought to share that privilege with the Navy."⁵³ In November 1965, an Air Force-Navy Coordinating Committee established six "Route Packages," or target zones, over the North. Seventh Air Force obtained a weekly responsibility for conducting attacks in three packages, and then alternated zones with CTF 77. Committee members soon agreed to make the exchange monthly to reduce confusion.⁵⁴

On 1 April 1966, Sharp overruled Moore's protests and made the Route Package assignments permanent. He also divided the zone in the Northeast quadrant to

⁵²Littauer and Uphoff, p. 11.

⁵³USAF Oral History Interview of Lieutenant General Joseph H. Moore by Major Samuel E. Riddlebarger and Lieutenant Colonel Valentino Castellina, 22 November 1969, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-241, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁴JCS Briefing Text, "Air Operations against North Vietnam and Laos," January 1967, in Target Study--North Vietnam, AFHRC, file number K178.2-34.

create a seventh route package. The Air Force received responsibility for attacks in Route Packages 5 and 6A, the two northernmost zones containing Hanoi and the Northwest Railroad. The Navy had responsibility for Route Packages 2, 3, 4, and 6B, which together extended from the 18th parallel to China and included Haiphong and part of the Northeast Railroad. General William C. Westmoreland, the Commander of US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), received authority to schedule strikes in Route Package 1, located immediately north of the Demilitarized Zone.

Despite claims that the Air Force could attack targets in the Navy's zones and vice versa, such raids occurred infrequently. Seventh Air Force could attack Navy targets only with that service's prior permission, and the opposite was true for the carrier group.⁵⁵ Johnson's numerical limitations on sorties fueled the rivalry between the services to secure missions, resulting in raids during poor weather and missions with decreased bomb loads during the 1966 munitions shortage.⁵⁶ "There is nothing more demoralizing," wrote a frustrated Air Force pilot in 1966, "than the sight of an F-4 taxiing out with nothing but a pair of bombs nestled among its ejector racks. However, it looks much better for the commander and the service concerned to show 200 sorties on paper, even when 40 or 50 would do the same job."⁵⁷

In addition to interservice competition, the military's intelligence efforts hampered Rolling Thunder's effectiveness. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA),

⁵⁵Greenhalgh interview, 17 May 1985.

⁵⁶Robert L. Gallucci, Neither Peace nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Viet-Nam (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 80-84; Littauer and Uphoff, p. 38. The shortage of 750-pound "iron" bombs stemmed from the Air Force's emphasis on nuclear weapons in the post-World War II era. In February 1966, the Defense Department repurchased 3000 bombs from West Germany at \$21.00 apiece. West Germany had originally bought the bombs for scrap at \$1.70 each. See John Morrocco, Thunder from Above (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 121-22.

⁵⁷Quoted in Morrocco, p. 125. In July 1966, shortly after General William C. Momyer replaced Moore as 7th Air Force Commander, a period of poor weather obscured targets in the Red River Valley. Momyer ordered his units not to fly and called for ground crews to perform preventative maintenance. A message soon arrived from the Pentagon, telling Momyer to fly to prevent the Navy from tallying a higher sortie count. See Greenhalgh interview, 17 May 1985.

comprising intelligence specialists from the four services, was the primary source of the Joint Chiefs' information for Rolling Thunder. The agency paid little attention to what Hanoi said on the radio and dismissed Northern broadcasts as propaganda.⁵⁸ Instead of trying to determine Hanoi's strategy, the DIA focused on quantifying the destruction caused by Rolling Thunder. This emphasis led air commanders to judge the campaign's results in numerical terms. Wheeler told the President that in 1966 Rolling Thunder had "destroyed over 4,600 trucks and damaged over 4,600 trucks; destroyed over 4,700 logistic water craft and damaged an additional 8,700 water craft; destroyed over 800 items of railroad rolling stock and damaged nearly 1,700; and destroyed 16 locomotives and damaged an additional 15."⁵⁹ The DIA evaluated the raids on power plants by estimating the percentage of the North's generating capacity destroyed; it did not further assess whether remaining facilities would adequately supply the enemy's needs. Given amounts of destruction were also suspect. "When a pilot reported a burned-out truck you didn't know whether it was empty or full or, in fact, whether it was a truck that had already been counted by somebody else," Colonel Edelen explained.⁶⁰ The agency could not accurately calculate how many tons of supplies the North Vietnamese shipped, how many tons Americans destroyed, or how many tons arrived in the South.

Seventh Air Force intelligence operations highlighted the difficulties of acquiring valid bombing results. Between 1965 and 1966, the intelligence staff was never fully manned. Some officers at the Saigon headquarters began their day preparing for the commander's 0600 morning intelligence briefing and worked until 2100. To determine the results of raids, Brigadier General Rockly Trantafellu, the Chief

⁵⁸Patrick J. McGarvey, "The DIA: Intelligence to Please," The Washington Monthly 2 (July 1970), p. 72.

⁵⁹"Summary Notes of the 568th NSC Meeting," 8 February 1967, National Security Files, NSC Meetings Files, Vol. 4, Johnson Library, Box 2.

⁶⁰Edelen interview, 27 January 1970, pp. 66-67.

of 7th Air Force Intelligence, demanded that reconnaissance units obtain as many post-strike target photographs as possible. This requirement yielded a massive influx of photographs into the headquarters. "So many pictures came in that the photo interpreters were swamped," Lieutenant Colonel Greenhalgh remembered. "We had far too many to process them all."⁶¹ Copies of the processed photographs went to intelligence officers assigned to fighter units, yet pilots did not always see them. Greenhalgh recalled visiting strike squadrons and finding reconnaissance photographs stacked in a corner.⁶² The problem was not a dereliction of duty, but that some of the officers sent to field units were too inexperienced to know the material's value. Many of the most capable intelligence officers had security restrictions preventing their assignment away from Saigon. This limitation caused 7th Air Force Headquarters to dispatch some individuals with inadequate intelligence backgrounds to fighter squadrons.⁶³

OPERATIONAL CONTROLS

To pilots, operational controls were the most ominous limitation on the air campaign. While political and military constraints reduced Rolling Thunder's effectiveness by limiting its scope, operational controls hindered the accomplishment of approved missions. Chief among these obstructions were enemy defenses. MiG fighters downed their first American aircraft in April 1965. Three months later, the first American jet fell to a surface-to-air missile (SAM). By August 1967, the North possessed roughly 200 SAM sites, 7000 anti-aircraft guns, a sophisticated ground-controlled intercept (GCI) radar system, and 80 MiG fighters, ranging in types from the

⁶¹Greenhalgh interview, 17 May 1983; Greenhalgh letter, 4 April 1987.

⁶²USAF Oral History Interview of Lieutenant Colonel William H. Greenhalgh by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Eckert, 11 October 1967, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-40, pp. 6-7.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 37.

MiG 15 to the formidable MiG-21.⁶⁴ The array caused Colonel Jack Broughton, Deputy Commander of the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing, to describe North Vietnam as "the center of hell with Hanoi as its hub."⁶⁵ Hanoi gained the reputation as the world's most heavily-defended city, contributing to the decision not to commit B-52s against its installations. The toll of aircraft lost over the North rose from 171 in 1965, to 280 in 1966, to 326 in 1967, although the loss rate declined during the campaign.⁶⁶

Passive defenses also hindered Rolling Thunder. North Vietnamese General Van Tien Dung proclaimed that the "central task of all the party and people" was to assure the southward movement of men and supplies. To accomplish that goal, Hanoi mobilized its manpower to thwart interdiction. An estimated 500,000 laborers repaired rail lines, roads, and bridges. Pilots frequently wrecked the Kep Rail Yard on the Northeast Railroad, only to find the facility operational on the day following a strike. The North Vietnamese maintained heaps of steel rails and railroad ties at regular intervals along important routes to speed repair. Construction crews usually began working immediately after a strike and posted one or two individuals to watch unexploded bombs for signs that they might detonate. If a line break stalled a train, bicycle brigades unloaded its cargo and travelled beyond the break to where a second train arrived. They then reloaded the goods while repair crews continued to mend the track.⁶⁷

⁶⁴U. S. Grant Sharp, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 189. Sharp's staff surmised that the North Vietnamese occupied only 25 SAM sites at any one time.

⁶⁵Jack Broughton, Thud Ridge (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 24.

⁶⁶Littauer and Uphoff, p. 283; Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 136. Losses dropped from 3.4 aircraft per 1000 sorties in 1965 to 2.1 in 1966 and 1.9 in 1967. See Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 232.

⁶⁷Van Tien Dung, "Some Great Experiences of the People's War," in Visions of Victory: Selected Vietnamese Communist Military Writings, 1964-1968 (Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1969), p. 158; Air War against North Vietnam, part 4, 25 August 1967, pp. 324-25; Greenhalgh interview, 11 October 1967, pp. 32-33; Van Dyke, p. 49; Harrison E. Salisbury, Behind the Lines--Hanoi (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 86-91.

The Communists exerted similar efforts to maintain roads and bridges. Most highways were tar-surfaced over clay, allowing repair by shovel brigades. The North Vietnamese built miles of by-pass roads around choke points to make the highway system redundant. Journalist David Schoenbrun reported that a 65-mile trip from Hanoi to Nam Dinh took five hours in August 1967 because the highway

virtually does not exist as a road. A few miles out of Hanoi it becomes a crater-filled obstacle course. One does not drive down it, one bounces along over ruts and rocks. Within ten miles it runs out completely, and the Route detours across a river and on to a dike.⁶⁸

The North Vietnamese replaced destroyed bridges with fords, ferries, and pontoons. They constructed some bridges just below the water's surface, which prevented aerial observation of the structures.⁶⁹

The Communists also restricted travel times and dispersed oil reserves. Men and supplies moved only during darkness or poor weather. Beginning in mid-1965, the North Vietnamese placed oil storage tanks holding between 2200 and 3300 gallons near major highways. They supplemented these tanks with 55-gallon drums, which they deposited along roads and in cities, towns, and rice paddies. They placed large quantities near dikes as well, figuring that American raids against the structures were unlikely.⁷⁰

Geography and weather provided additional limitations on Rolling Thunder. North Vietnam's lush terrain was ideal for camouflage and the enemy frequently resorted to deception. Hanoi also exploited the proximity of Laos and Cambodia. Snaking through the eastern areas of both countries, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was a primary route to the South. Weather was one of the air campaign's most significant operational controls. From September to April, the dense clouds of the winter monsoons made continuous bombing impossible. The monsoons prevented Rolling

⁶⁸Quoted in Van Dyke, p. 49.

⁶⁹Greenhalgh interview, 11 October 1967, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁰Van Dyke, p. 207; Salisbury, pp. 90-91; Greenhalgh interview, 17 May 1985.

Thunder from starting in late February 1965 and canceled numerous missions in March. Poor weather also delayed the 1966 oil strikes and the 1967 raids against the Thai Nguyen steel complex and electric power plants. Most of the raids scheduled during the monsoon season against fixed targets became interdiction strikes because clouds obscured the primary objective. In 1966, only one percent of the year's 81,000 sorties flew against JCS-proposed fixed targets,⁷¹ and weather was a key reason for the low total. Moreover, the prospect of monsoons during spring 1968 contributed to Johnson's 31 March decision to curtail the campaign.⁷²

Three aircraft types performed most Rolling Thunder airstrikes, and none were well-suited to the foreboding environment of North Vietnam. The Air Force relied on the Republic F-105 Thunderchief and the McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantom, while the Navy employed the F-4 and the A-4 Skyhawk. Designed during the 1950s as a nuclear-attack fighter, the F-105 flew more than 75 percent of all Rolling Thunder strike sorties.⁷³ The massive single-seat fighter weighed more than 30,000 pounds fully-loaded and had difficulty turning in dogfights. Despite its renown for sustaining damage, the F-105 was especially vulnerable to anti-aircraft artillery. Maintenance problems also plagued the Thunderchief, which gained the nickname "Thud" from its pilots. The Navy developed the F-4 as a high-altitude interceptor. The Air Force acquired the dual-seat fighter in 1962 and modified it for ground attack. Capable of carrying eight tons of bombs, the Phantom suffered from a vulnerability to ground fire, poor rear cockpit visibility, and engines that emitted a heavy black smoke revealing its location. In addition, the Air Force version of the F-4 lacked an internal cannon for defense.⁷⁴ The Skyhawk, a diminutive single-seat fighter that carried a

⁷¹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 138.

⁷²Johnson, p. 400.

⁷³Air War--Vietnam (New York: Arno Press, 1978), p. 12.

⁷⁴One was finally added in late 1967. Air leaders initially believed that air-to-air missiles sufficed for defensive armament.

four ton bomb load, flew more bombing missions than any other naval aircraft in Vietnam.⁷⁵ Neither the F-105, F-4, nor A-4 could bomb in poor weather. With the B-52's virtual exclusion from Rolling Thunder, only the Navy's A-6 Intruder possessed an all-weather capability, and only two A-6 squadrons (30 aircraft) normally operated with CTF 77.

The combination of political, military, and operational controls produced a further operational limitation on Rolling Thunder: low pilot morale. Lieutenant Eliot Tozer III, an A-4 pilot, revealed in his diary the bitterness that many of his counterparts felt over the campaign:

The frustration comes on all levels. We fly a limited aircraft, drop limited ordnance, on rare targets in a severely limited amount of time. Worst of all, we do all this in a limited and highly unpopular war. . . . All theories aside, what I've got is personal pride pushing against a tangled web of frustration.⁷⁶

While the multiple controls did not cause a lack of courage or competence, they did produce disillusionment. The tremendous psychological strain on those who flew the air campaign cannot be quantified, but it must be included in the final assessment of Rolling Thunder's limitations.⁷⁷

BOMBING RESULTS

DAMAGE INFLICTED

The 600,000 tons of bombs that fell during Rolling Thunder destroyed 65 percent of the North's oil storage capacity, 59 percent of its power plants, 55 percent of

⁷⁵Peter B. Mersky and Norman Polmar, The Naval Air War in Vietnam (Annapolis: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1981), p. 19.

⁷⁶Quoted in Mersky and Polmar, pp. 180-81.

⁷⁷Colonel Broughton's superb combat memoirs offer numerous examples of the frustrations felt by the Air Force's F-105 pilots. A recipient of the Air Force Cross, Broughton was court-martialed for his vigorous defense of two pilots accused of strafing a Russian ship in Haiphong harbor.

its major bridges, 9,821 vehicles and 1,966 railroad cars.⁷⁸ Yet the numerical results of Rolling Thunder gave little indication of the campaign's true impact, and the price of inflicting any destruction was high. Besides the loss of men and aircraft, the campaign cost the United States \$6.60 to render \$1.00 worth of damage in 1965, and \$9.60 a year later.⁷⁹

Almost 90 percent of Rolling Thunder's weight struck transportation-related targets.⁸⁰ Although bombing hindered the movement of men and supplies, it did not significantly affect infiltration. Two factors limited interdiction's effectiveness: the nature of the war in the South, and the North's excess resupply capability. The war in South Vietnam was a guerrilla conflict. Hanoi had only 55,000 North Vietnamese Army troops in the South by August 1967; the remaining 245,000 Communist soldiers were Viet Cong.⁸¹ None of these forces engaged in frequent combat, and the Viet Cong intermingled with the Southern populace. As a result, Communist supply needs were minimal. Enemy battalions fought an average of one day in 30 and had a total daily supply requirement of roughly 380 tons. Of this amount, the Communists needed only

⁷⁸U. S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, Report on the War in Vietnam (As of 30 June 1968) (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 53.

⁷⁹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 136. The CIA computed Rolling Thunder's cost-effectiveness in early 1967.

⁸⁰Headquarters USAF, Air Operations--North Vietnam, 27 April 1967, AFHRC, file number K143.0572-90, part 4, p. 6.

⁸¹"Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Vietnam," 18 August 1967, Meeting Notes File, Johnson Library, Box 1. In July 1965, Defense Department analysts estimated that 192,000 Viet Cong and three regiments of the North Vietnamese Army (7500 men) fought in the South. See Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 3 November 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 7EE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

34 tons a day from sources outside the South.⁸² Seven two-and-a-half-ton trucks could transport the requirement,⁸³ which was less than one percent of the daily tonnage imported into North Vietnam. Sea, road, and rail imports averaged 5700 tons a day, yet Hanoi possessed the capacity to import 17,200 tons. Defense Department analysts estimated in February 1967 that an unrestrained air offensive against resupply facilities, accompanied by mining Northern harbors, would only reduce the import capacity to 7,200 tons.⁸⁴ The amount of goods that the Communists shipped south "is primarily a function of their own choosing," the Joint Chiefs remarked in August 1965.⁸⁵ Their appraisal remained valid throughout Rolling Thunder.

Instead of limiting North Vietnamese imports, the air campaign fostered their growth. Hanoi's leaders pointed to the bombing to extract greater support from the Chinese and Soviets. "In the fight against the war of destruction," General Van Tien Dung announced, "we must rely mainly on our own strength, and, at the same time, strive for international assistance, especially the assistance of all countries in the socialist camp."⁸⁶ With the help of Chinese laborers, the North Vietnamese modified

⁸²Headquarters USAF, Analysis of Effectiveness of Interdiction in Southeast Asia, Second Progress Report, May 1966, AFHRC, file number K168.187-21, p. 7. The study further noted: "The present low requirement of 34 tons/day, though made up largely of ammunition, provides much less than is usually calculated for North Vietnamese forces. Thirty six percent of the supply support for a soldier in a North Vietnamese light division consists of ammunition. When he is deployed to the south this drops to 18%. Only 6% of the supplies furnished Viet Cong Main Force soldiers is ammunition. Only a 13% firepower utilization rate is presently being experienced by the VC/NVA troops in South Vietnam." McNamara acknowledged in 1967 that Communist forces fought an average of one day in 30, and remarked that they needed 15 tons of supplies daily from external sources. The Joint Chiefs had estimated in August 1965 that the enemy needed 13 tons per day of "external logistical support." See Air War against North Vietnam, 25 August 1967, part 4, p. 299; Annex A to JCSM 613-65, 27 August 1965, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 2EE, Johnson Library, Box 75.

⁸³The standard military two-and-a-half ton truck could transport five tons of goods over roads and two and a half tons overland.

⁸⁴Memorandum from Walt W. Rostow to the President, 6 May 1967, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Folder 2EE, Johnson Library, Box 75; Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 146.

⁸⁵Appendix A to JCSM 613-65, 27 August 1967.

⁸⁶Van Tien Dung, p. 161.

the narrow-gauge rails of the Northeast and Northwest railroads so that Chinese standard-gauge cars could move onto North Vietnamese tracks. An average of 1000 tons of supplies arrived daily by the Northeast railroad.⁸⁷ The combined value of Chinese and Soviet imports totalled between \$250 and \$400 million in 1965 alone, producing a six percent increase in the North's Gross National Product. By January 1968, Hanoi had received almost \$600 million in economic aid and another \$1 billion in military assistance.⁸⁸ The Soviets had virtually suspended aid during the three years prior to Rolling Thunder, but with the initiation of the air campaign Soviet support rapidly eclipsed the Chinese. The Russians did not wish to appear unwilling to help a sister Communist state, plus they did not want the war to heighten Chinese influence in Southeast Asia.⁸⁹

Like interdiction, the attacks on oil storage areas and electric power plants had a marginal effect on Hanoi's war effort. Although North Vietnamese Defense Minister General Vo Nguyen Giap called the POL strikes the "most serious" intensification of the air war,⁹⁰ the raids did not reduce infiltration capacity. Northern trains ran on coal or wood rather than oil. Hanoi required 32,000 tons of oil per year to operate its economy, and it possessed over 60,000 tons in dispersed sites by the end of 1966. To fuel the trucks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the North Vietnamese needed less than 1600 tons of oil a year.⁹¹ Meager requirements resulted in a similar

⁸⁷Van Dyke, p. 51.

⁸⁸Jason Summer Study, "Summary and Conclusions," 30 August 1966, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 116; Department of Defense Systems Analysis Report, January 1968, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 225-26. The Systems Analysis Report stated: "If economic criteria were the only consideration, North Vietnam would show a substantial net gain from the bombing."

⁸⁹CIA Memorandum 11-65, "Future Soviet Moves in Vietnam," 27 April 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 3, Johnson Library, Box 41; CIA Memorandum 18-65, "Soviet Tactics Concerning Vietnam," 15 July 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 6, Johnson Library, Box 43.

⁹⁰Vo Nguyen Giap, "The Big Victory, the Great Task," in Visions of Victory, p. 204.

⁹¹Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 110-112.

excess of generating capacity. The 129,000 kilowatts produced by power plants were not essential to the North's economy. Over 2000 portable generators compensated for the power stations destroyed in spring 1967.⁹² Two of the facilities attacked were 1,000 kilowatt plants near the Chinese border. The North's largest power station had a capacity of 32,500 kilowatts, which equaled the capacity of an American plant supporting 25,000 people in a lightly industrial town.⁹³ "To a Western, so-called developed society, cutting our electricity means something," commented Oliver Todd after visiting Hanoi. "It doesn't mean very much in Vietnam. The Vietnamese for years and years have been used to living by candlelight or oil lamps."⁹⁴

Despite Admiral Sharp's contention that the air campaign "was very costly to the enemy in terms of material, manpower, management, and distribution,"⁹⁵ most North Vietnamese civilians did not suffer from the bombing. Rolling Thunder's political and military controls helped keep the civilian death toll low for a campaign of its magnitude. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimated that the 200,000 tons of bombs dropped by 1967 had caused 29,600 civilian casualties.⁹⁶ By comparison, the United States dropped 147,000 tons of ordnance on Japan during the last year of World War II and killed 330,000 noncombatants.⁹⁷ Harrison Salisbury, who visited Hanoi during December 1966, remarked that the casualty figures he received for the 13 December raid on a vehicle depot "were not impressive." North Vietnamese authorities told him that the attack had killed nine persons and injured 21, yet Hanoi Radio proclaimed that American pilots had blatantly raided civilian structures and caused

⁹²Van Dyke, p. 216.

⁹³Edelen interview, 27 January 1970, pp. 82-83.

⁹⁴Oliver Todd, "The Americans Are Not Invincible," New Left Review 47 (January-February 1968), p. 10.

⁹⁵CINCPAC Message to the JCS, January 1968, in Sharp, p. 302.

⁹⁶Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 136.

⁹⁷See Chapter I, p. 13.

substantial casualties.⁹⁸ For the three and a half years of Rolling Thunder, bombing killed an estimated 52,000 civilians out of a population of 18 million.⁹⁹

Evacuations contributed to the small number of civilian casualties, but neither Hanoi nor Haiphong was devoid of people. Salisbury described the capital as a "vibrant, pulsating city" and observed that its inhabitants thronged to beer parlors and bars each afternoon. North Vietnamese leaders issued their first order to evacuate Hanoi on 28 February 1965. Only 50,000 persons had left by the end of the year, and many drifted back because the city appeared safer than the countryside. During 1965, the Northern government encouraged people in the frequently-bombed southern panhandle to settle in areas north of Hanoi. While travelling, they could stay in the capital for two weeks to buy necessities and settle their affairs. Rolling Thunder's intensification in mid-1966 produced a corresponding increase in evacuation. By late 1967, the city's population had shrunk from 600,000 to less than 400,000. Thirty thousand children remained, despite orders for their mandatory removal, and Todd thought that Hanoi was "still a fairly lively place." Haiphong's population fell from 400,000 to 250,000 by mid-1967.¹⁰⁰

For the typical North Vietnamese, Rolling Thunder was a nuisance rather than a danger. Few consumer goods other than food arrived in the North. While the average daily intake of calories fell from 1910 in 1963 to 1880 in 1967, the total was more than sufficient to sustain the population. The North Vietnamese produced a yearly average of 4,400,000 tons of rice, but the combination of too much spring rain and a fall drought in 1966 reduced that year's total to 4,000,000 tons. China provided over 600,000 tons in 1967 to offset the deficiency. Hanoi's use of 500,000 individuals to repair lines of communication had no effect on rice production. The North Vietnamese farmed their

⁹⁸Salisbury, pp. 62-64; Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 135.

⁹⁹NSSM 1 (February 1969), Congressional Record 118, part 13 (10 May 1972), p. 16833.

¹⁰⁰Salisbury, pp. 42, 113; Van Dyke, pp. 30, 127-33; Todd, p. 4, Sharp, p. 161.

rice fields inefficiently, employing more manpower than necessary. Farmers also worked erratic schedules. During the 1965-66 spring rice season in Nam Ha province, they spent an average of 29.1 days in the rice fields during January and stayed in the fields only 1.3 days in April. Hanoi further relied on a rapid population growth and evacuees to supplement air defense and repair activities. "Fight and produce at the same time!" was the slogan guiding the homefront's struggle against Rolling Thunder. The vast amount of available manpower guaranteed that the Communists could simultaneously accomplish both tasks with ease.¹⁰¹

Although Rolling Thunder was a surprise to the North Vietnamese, they quickly displayed a stoic determination to resist the bombing. Premier Pham Van Dong commented that the first raids created a "crisis" because of the disorganized movement of men and supplies to the South and the lack of sophisticated air defense weaponry.¹⁰² By early April 1965, however, Northern leaders felt confident that they could withstand the aerial onslaught. Dong announced a "Four Point Program" for peace in Vietnam and proclaimed that its terms were the only basis for a settlement. The program's key features were the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam and the acceptance of a Communist government in the South. Hanoi soon added a fifth prerequisite: an unconditional bombing halt. North Vietnamese leaders knew that Johnson had no intention of unleashing unrestricted air power against their country. On 24 February 1965, the American ambassador to Poland gave Chinese ambassador Wang Kuo-chuan a letter stating that the United States had no desire to destroy North Vietnam. Canadian emissary Blair Seaborn repeated this message in a March visit to Hanoi, and American

¹⁰¹Van Dyke, pp. 28, 160-63; Salisbury, pp. 120, 182; Department of Defense Systems Analysis Report, January 1968, p. 227; Giap, p. 233; Dung, p. 169.

¹⁰²Salisbury, p. 196.

officials echoed the pronouncement.¹⁰³ North Vietnamese leaders understood many of the reasons for the restraint. "The U.S. imperialists must restrict the U.S. forces participating in a local war because otherwise their global strategy would be hampered and their influence throughout the world would diminish," remarked Giap in 1967. "They must restrict their participation in order to avoid upsetting the political, economic, and social life of the United States."¹⁰⁴

Realizing that Rolling Thunder would not produce unacceptable damage, Northern leaders used the air offensive to create popular support for the war. "In Churchillian style, the [Hanoi] Politburo portrayed the North as a set-upon David fighting a bullyboy Goliath, the United States, and thereby was able to rally the North Vietnamese into grimly determined war efforts," observed Air Force Major General Edward Lansdale.¹⁰⁵ Hanoi responded to the small number of air attacks in 1965 by dispersing its oil and ordering the evacuation of urban centers. Although these measures evoked some resentment from the populace, they tended to confirm The Strategic Bombing Survey's assertion that a police state could maintain effective control over national will in the wake of bombing. Rolling Thunder's gradually increasing severity acclimated the North Vietnamese to the campaign, further solidifying Hanoi's control over its people. "In terms of its morale effects," RAND analyst Oleg Hoeffding argued in 1966, "the US campaign may have presented the [North Vietnamese] regime with a near-ideal mix of intended restraint and accidental gore".¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 3: 330. McNamara announced on 29 June 1966, the day that American aircraft first struck the North's major oil storage facilities: "Our objectives are not to destroy the Communist government of North Vietnam." Quoted in Oleg Hoeffding, Bombing North Vietnam: An Appraisal of Economic and Political Effects (December 1966), RAND Corporation Memorandum RM-5213, p. 22.

¹⁰⁴Giap, p. 207.

¹⁰⁵Statement by Major General Edward Lansdale in W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., The Lessons of Vietnam (New York: Crane, Russak, and Company, 1977), p. 127.

¹⁰⁶Hoeffding, p. 17.

For Northern leaders, a strong popular resolve was crucial to achieving their goal of a unified Vietnam. They never acknowledged the South Vietnamese government as legal, and they viewed the Viet Cong insurgency as a just movement to overthrow a tyrannical regime. Consequently, Northern leaders regarded Rolling Thunder, and other efforts supporting the Saigon government, as unlawful actions. To Hanoi, Johnson's proposals to stop the bombing were tantamount to demands for unconditional surrender. In exchange for a bombing halt, he called for an end to both infiltration and Communist attacks in the South. Meanwhile, American and South Vietnamese ground forces would continue fighting. Northern leaders could never respond to an American bombing halt by reducing insurgent support, for to do so would give Rolling Thunder, and hence the Saigon government, a measure of legitimacy. By late 1967, the President had relaxed his preconditions for ending the campaign. Yet he still demanded that the Communists "not take advantage" of a bombing halt. Northern leaders shunned the offer. Their decision in early April 1968 to begin negotiations revealed not acquiescence, but necessity.

Although the 1968 Tet Offensive was a psychological defeat for the United States, it was a military disaster for the North Vietnamese. Almost 40,000 Viet Cong, the core of the insurgent leadership, died in the assault.¹⁰⁷ The brutality exhibited by many Communist units--the Viet Cong executed 2,800 South Vietnamese in Hue and buried them in mass graves¹⁰⁸--caused many who had backed the Communists to transfer their allegiance to Saigon. In short, the Tet Offensive destroyed the Viet

¹⁰⁷Guenter Lewy, America in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 76; Gabriel Kolko, Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States and the Modern Historical Experience (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 327. Dave Richard Palmer estimates that Communist losses for the first six months of 1968 were over 100,000 men. See Summons of the Trumpet (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 208.

¹⁰⁸George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States in Vietnam 1950-1975 (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), p. 187.

Cong's combat effectiveness.¹⁰⁹ To continue the war, Hanoi had to rely on its regular army, and Northern troops could not sustain the massive assault in the South. North Vietnam's leaders thus decided to begin negotiations. Observing the Tet Offensive's impact on the American public, they believed that protracted peace talks, accompanied by small-unit harassing attacks in the South, might force the United States to abandon its ally.¹¹⁰ Further, Northern leaders felt confident that the American reaction to Tet would trigger a withdrawal of some United States ground troops, increasing the likelihood of Communist victory in a future offensive. When they launched their final assault against the South, Hanoi's officials did not want Americans to stand in the way.

EFFECTIVENESS IN ACHIEVING POLITICAL OBJECTIVES: ACTUALITIES

Rolling Thunder made a meager contribution towards achieving Johnson's positive political goal of an independent, stable, non-Communist South Vietnam. Despite the bombing, the North Vietnamese did not abandon the Southern insurgency. Civilian leaders and air commanders alike miscalculated the effect that the campaign would have on the North. Both groups thought that the North's industrial apparatus was vulnerable to air attack, and that its vulnerability offered a means to end the war. Civilian leaders--and, initially, some air chiefs¹¹¹--believed that the threat of industrial devastation would compel Hanoi to end the conflict. By July 1965, air commanders unanimously maintained that the destruction of essential industries was necessary before the North would stop fighting. The only industrial component vital to the North's war-making capacity was its transportation system, and it did not have to operate at peak efficiency to be effective. A glut of imports and the Communists'

¹⁰⁹Douglas Pike, PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), p. 47.

¹¹⁰Kolko, pp. 303-04, 329, 333-34; Pike, pp. 223-24.

¹¹¹Sharp was one, as were some members of the Pentagon's Joint Staff. See Chapter III, pp. 9, 12.

limited needs rendered the remainder of the North's industrial establishment superfluous. Air commanders grossly miscalculated the value of oil to the Northern war effort. They further thought that the destruction of the steel and electric power industries would disrupt the North's economic and social welfare. Yet perceptions in Hanoi differed from those in Washington and Honolulu. Northern leaders had no qualms about sacrificing their "high-value" industries. "Depending on the concrete situation, sometimes we regard destroying the enemy as the main task and sometimes we regard defending targets from the enemy as the main task," Giap asserted. "Yet normally the principle of positively destroying the enemy is the most basic and decisive one in our efforts."¹¹²

Besides overestimating the importance of Northern industry, American leaders underestimated their enemy's determination. "I have a feeling that the other side is not that tough," Rusk told Johnson in December 1965.¹¹³ The Joint Chiefs reiterated the comment. In January 1966, they contended that McNamara exaggerated the "will of the Hanoi leaders to continue a struggle which they realize they cannot win in the face of progressively greater destruction of their country."¹¹⁴ Ambassador Maxwell Taylor recalled that American civilian and military chiefs knew little about the North's leaders and virtually nothing about their intentions.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, Johnson was certain that the North Vietnamese had their price, and he believed that air power would help him find it. Neither he, his political advisors, nor his air

¹¹²Giap, p. 232.

¹¹³"12:35 P. M. Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors on Bombing Pause," 18 December 1965. In a 15 July 1985 interview with the author at Athens, Georgia, Rusk stated that underestimating the tenacity of the North Vietnamese was one of his greatest mistakes regarding Vietnam. "I thought the North Vietnamese would reach a point, like the Chinese and North Koreans in Korea, and Stalin during the Berlin airlift, when they would finally give in," he reflected.

¹¹⁴Quoted in Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 75.

¹¹⁵Maxwell D. Taylor, Swords and Plowshares (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1972), p. 401.

commanders imagined that their Third World enemy could withstand even a limited bombing campaign. When that realization came, it was for all a great shock.

To be effective, bombing had to eliminate the prospect of Communist victory in the South. It could not do so. Political and military controls prevented attacks against the only two targets that would have affected Northern war-making capacity: people and food. Yet raids against population centers and the Red River dikes would have had a minimal impact on the war in the South, where Communist forces held the initiative as to the locale, duration, and frequency of combat. As long as they chose to fight sparingly, they had little to fear from Rolling Thunder. "We have no basis for assuming that the Viet Cong will fight a war on our terms when they can continue to fight the kind of war they fought so well against both the French and the GVN [Government of (South) Vietnam]," Under Secretary of State George Ball warned in June 1965.¹¹⁶ The Joint Chiefs ignored the caution. They searched in vain for a way to bring the Communists to battle, believing that increased combat would produce increased supply requirements, which would in turn make interdiction effective. General Dung labeled the air campaign as "the product of defeat on the Southern battlefield," and insisted that it would never affect the Communists' initiative in the South.¹¹⁷ Giap concurred, exclaiming that the "great power of the people's war" would overcome the "so-called superiority of the U.S. Air Force."¹¹⁸ Despite the propaganda, the two generals' assertions contained a large measure of truth.

The Tet Offensive provided the most graphic illustration of Rolling Thunder's failure to affect the Southern war. Hanoi completed planning for the attack in mid-1967.¹¹⁹ By September, American intelligence units received inklings of the

¹¹⁶Memorandum from Ball to the President, 29 June 1965, National Security Files, NSC History: "Deployment of Major US Forces to Vietnam, July 1965," Vol. 6, Johnson Library, Box 43.

¹¹⁷Dung, p. 155.

¹¹⁸Giap, p. 234.

¹¹⁹Palmer, pp. 166-67; William Fundy interview, 29 May 1969, Tape 4, p. 32.

assault.¹²⁰ The advanced notice was of little value to air chiefs, however, for the Communists had already stockpiled much of the necessary material through normal infiltration. To launch the offensive, Communist field commanders needed only to know when and where attacks should occur. Rolling Thunder had no effect on the enemy's capability, or willingness, to start the assault.

The air campaign did boost South Vietnamese morale. In March 1965, it probably contributed as much to the stability of the Southern regime as any measure could have. Rolling Thunder took Northern leaders by surprise and demonstrated American resolve. Yet it could not sustain Southern morale at a high level. As the bombing continued, South Vietnamese began accepting it as the status quo. "In a sense, South Vietnam is now 'addicted' to the program," McNamara remarked on 30 July 1965. "A permanent abandonment of the program would have a distinct depressing effect on morale in South Vietnam."¹²¹ Continued raids increased the United States' commitment to Saigon. Finally, in March 1968 Johnson determined that the cost of the undertaking had become too great.

While failing to achieve the President's positive goal, Rolling Thunder also hindered the attainment of many negative objectives. The campaign did not cause the Soviets or the Chinese to intervene actively in the war, but it stimulated Soviet assistance to the North. The Soviet Union and China competed for Hanoi's favor, which enabled the North Vietnamese to act independently of the guidance of either. Although Johnson and his advisors were aware of the animosity between the Communist superpowers, they could not exploit it.¹²² The President hesitated to mine Northern ports, not only because he doubted mining's effectiveness in reducing imports, but also

¹²⁰Kolko, p. 305.

¹²¹Memorandum from McNamara to the President, 30 July 1965. Pentagon Papers. Gravel edition, 3: 387.

¹²²"We didn't have any simplistic, naive views that Communism was monolithic," Rostow stated. "But the split only made it worse [for us in Vietnam], because both Russia and China were competing." See Rostow interview, 23 May 1986.

because he felt that it would provoke the Soviets. All Soviet imports arrived by sea, and the Chinese were unlikely to permit the transfer of Russian goods across Chinese territory.¹²³ Moreover, mining could humiliate the Soviets by reminding them of the 1962 naval quarantine around Cuba. Johnson thus believed that a disruption of Soviet shipping would compel the Russians to fight, a conviction shared by Llewellyn Thompson, his ambassador to Moscow.¹²⁴ By influencing the Soviets to support Hanoi, Rolling Thunder aggravated the President's fear that Vietnam might trigger nuclear holocaust.

Besides increasing Johnson's apprehension over a Third World War, Rolling Thunder helped to create an unfavorable impression of America abroad and to wreck the President's designs for a Great Society at home. Instead of viewing the air campaign as a United States' effort to support an ally, many nations saw it as an exercise of American aggression. France, Britain, and India officially denounced the 1966 raids on oil storage areas in Hanoi and Haiphong. The spring 1967 raids on power plants drew similar responses. In the United States, student protesters castigated Rolling Thunder, and in October 1967, 30 Congressmen sent Johnson an open letter urging him to stop the bombing. Yet to most Americans, the air offensive was a source of confused anger. Baffled by the bombing restrictions, they called for heavier raids on the North. The 1966 oil strikes boosted the President's sagging popularity.¹²⁵ In July 1967, a Harris poll revealed that 72 percent of the public favored continued bombing, and that 40 percent wanted increased military pressure on Hanoi.¹²⁶ Rolling Thunder satisfied

¹²³In 1972, when President Richard Nixon mined Northern harbors, the Chinese refused to transport Soviet goods for three months. Rostow interview, 23 May 1986.

¹²⁴Message from Ambassador Thompson to the Secretary of State, 1 March 1968, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 246-47.

¹²⁵"Opening the Fourth Front," Newsweek, 18 July 1966, p. 18. Johnson's approval rating on his conduct of the war rose from 42 to 54 percent.

¹²⁶"A New Sophistication," Newsweek, 10 July 1967, pp. 20-21. Fifteen percent of the public opposed bombing, while 13 percent remained uncertain of bombing's utility. Regarding American goals in Vietnam, 36 percent wanted more effort at negotiation, 18 percent desired an "all-out" war, and six percent wanted withdrawal.

neither "hawks" nor "doves," but its salience caused both groups to divert their attention from Johnson's domestic programs to Vietnam. The war turned the President's plans for a Great Society to ashes, and bombing helped obliterate his dream.

EFFECTIVENESS IN ACHIEVING POLITICAL OBJECTIVES: PERCEPTIONS

Those who directed Rolling Thunder had difficulty evaluating its effectiveness, and bias tainted most appraisals. To Johnson and his political advisors, the campaign was a qualified success; to air commanders, it was a qualified failure. "I was always convinced that bombing was less important to a successful outcome in Vietnam than what was done militarily on the ground in the South," the President reflected.¹²⁷ He thought that Rolling Thunder significantly reduced the amount of men and materiel available to the Communists in South Vietnam, and that bombing demonstrated American resolve. He was uncertain, however, that Rolling Thunder affected the North's willingness to fight. Despite later stating that he never expected air power to assure victory, he thought that the attacks on oil and electric power might persuade the Communists to end the war.¹²⁸ Rolling Thunder's failure to induce negotiations left the President ambivalent over the campaign's results. He felt that it had benefited the quest for an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, but noted that the objective still remained out of reach.

Rusk and Taylor believed that Rolling Thunder slowed Hanoi's drive to subdue the South. "We never thought we could suffocate North Vietnamese supplies by bombing," the Secretary of State remembered. "We could cause some effect; perhaps with Rolling Thunder it took two months instead of two weeks for a given amount of supplies to arrive in the South." He also asserted, however, that the campaign was not worth the cost in men and planes, and that it had a meager effect on Northern morale.

¹²⁷ Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 240.

¹²⁸ Oral History Interview of Lyndon Baines Johnson by William J. Jordan, LBJ Ranch, Texas, 12 August 1969, Johnson Library, pp. 18-19.

"Possibly we should have tried saturation bombing," he conjectured.¹²⁹ Taylor contended that Rolling Thunder raised Southern morale and made infiltration more difficult. Like Rusk, the former ambassador speculated that a massive air attack might have paid dividends. "We could have flattened everything in and around Hanoi," he later maintained. "That doesn't mean it would stop the war, but it would certainly have made it extremely difficult to continue it effectively." He insisted that heavy bombing would have disrupted the North's centralized government and produced chaos. Still, although he deplored the bombing restrictions, he believed that Johnson's tight control of the campaign was appropriate. "The bombing of North Vietnam was the use of a military tool for political purposes. . . . The fact that the control came from here [Washington] was entirely justified," he asserted.¹³⁰

National Security Advisor Walt W. Rostow agreed that Rolling Thunder supported American goals in Vietnam. He argued that bombing imposed a tax on Hanoi's logistical flow, and that it forced a large amount of Northern manpower to participate in air defense activities. "Why do you think they kept saying 'Stop the bombing' and brought forth every device of diplomacy they could think of?" he asked. "Of course it [bombing] was painful. But it was not painful enough by itself." Rostow declared that the United States could have won a military victory only by cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail with American ground troops. He claimed that the Communists' supply needs far exceeded intelligence estimates, and that severing the Laotian route would have dealt the enemy a fatal blow.¹³¹

¹²⁹Rusk interview, 15 July 1985.

¹³⁰Oral History Interview of Maxwell D. Taylor by Dorothy Pierce, Washington, D. C., 10 February 1969, Johnson Library, Tape 2, pp. 10-11; Oral History Interview of Maxwell D. Taylor by Ted Gittinger, Washington, D. C., 14 September 1981, Johnson Library, Tape 1, pp. 7-10.

¹³¹Rostow interview, 23 May 1986. "Everybody was dead wrong on the scale of the supply operation," he stated. "They learned it when the Cambodian government was overthrown by the Cambodian military and they turned over to us the tonnages that went into Sihanoukville. The tonnages they put through were astonishing. . . . Al Haig called my attention to this after I had left the government."

Despite his opposition to Rolling Thunder, McNamara thought that it was successful when "weighed against its stated objectives." The Secretary announced that bombing had raised Southern morale, forced the North Vietnamese to pay a price for continuing aggression, and made infiltration more difficult. "There can be no question that the bombing campaign has and is hurting North Vietnam's war-making capability," he commented in August 1967.¹³² Yet McNamara believed that bombing could accomplish nothing more. He stated that the Communists' minimal logistical requirements prevented interdiction from affecting the scale of their combat operations. He further insisted that no campaign, except one targeting the Northern population, would independently force Hanoi to end the war. Unlike most air commanders, McNamara recognized a fundamental flaw nullifying Rolling Thunder's utility as a persuasive instrument. "The agrarian nature of the economy precludes an economic collapse as a result of the bombing," he declared.¹³³ As long as Hanoi chose to wage guerrilla warfare, his contention that air power would have a meager effect on the conflict remained valid.

In contrast to Johnson and most of his political advisors, air commanders considered Rolling Thunder a failure. They blamed its lack of success on the President's political controls. "We should lift these restrictions and we would then get results," General McConnell told Johnson in 1966.¹³⁴ Air leaders repeated his pronouncement after the campaign ended. Major General Ginsburgh argued that the Joint Chiefs' 94-target scheme could have produced victory at any time during 1965 and 1966.¹³⁵ Admiral Sharp remarked that such an effort after the Tet Offensive would

¹³²Air War against North Vietnam, 25 August 1967, part 4, pp. 275-78.

¹³³Robert S. McNamara, Statement to Congress, 1 February 1968, Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, 4: 232.

¹³⁴"Summary Notes of the 556th National Security Council Meeting," 29 January 1966, National Security Files, NSC Meeting Notes File, Vols. 3-5, Johnson Library, Box 2.

¹³⁵Ginsburgh interview, 26 May 1971, p. 22.

have won the war.¹³⁶ Yet the "victory" pursued by air commanders differed from that envisioned by the President. By destroying the vital elements of Northern industry, air leaders hoped to gain the unconditional triumph promised by Air Force strategic bombing doctrine. Bombing would, they maintained, wreck the Northern economy and compel Hanoi to end the war. Johnson's aims in Vietnam did not include a North prostrated by air power. For him, "victory" was an independent, non-Communist South and a North that accepted that condition as the status quo. While attempting to stop Hanoi's aggression, he sought other goals that limited his use of force. These negative objectives led to Rolling Thunder's political controls. Most air commanders never fully understood the President's negative aims. Accordingly, they could not fathom the controls that contradicted the main tenets of strategic bombing doctrine. In their eyes, the restrictions did little to obscure bombing's grim realities. Commented Sharp: "The application of military, war-making power is an ugly thing--stark, harsh, and demanding--and it cannot be made nicer by pussy-footing around with it."¹³⁷

Johnson's controls produced a profound sense of despair among air leaders. At the end of a 1967 briefing on Rolling Thunder, General McConnell held his head in his hands and lamented, "I can't tell you how I feel . . . I'm so sick of it . . . I have never been so goddamned frustrated by it all."¹³⁸ Two years later, after announcing his retirement, McConnell received a letter from 7th Air Force Commander General William W. Momyer, whose comments epitomized the air chiefs' disillusionment:

It has been a privilege to serve as a member of your team. My regret is we didn't win the war. We had the force, skill, and intelligence, but our civilian betters wouldn't turn us loose. Surely our Air Force has lived up to all expectations within the restraints that have been put on it. If there is one lesson to come out of this war, it must be a reaffirmation of the axiom--don't get in a fight unless you are prepared to do whatever

¹³⁶USAF Oral History Interview of Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp by Dr. Robert R. Kritt, 19 May 1971, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-409, p. 18.

¹³⁷Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat*, p. 269.

¹³⁸Quoted in David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 646-47.

is necessary to win. This axiom is as old as military forces, and I don't see that modern weapons have changed it. I suppose a military man will always be in the dilemma of supporting policy even though he knows it surely restricts the capacity of military forces to produce the desired effect. One has no alternative but to support the policy and take the knocks that inevitably follow when military forces don't produce the desired effects within the constraints of the policy.¹³⁹

Air leaders viewed Momyer's axiom, which paraphrased Douglas MacArthur's evaluation of the Korean War, as the overriding lesson of Rolling Thunder. Sharp, Wheeler, and Moore echoed the remark in their assessments of the air campaign.¹⁴⁰ Such statements revealed the air chiefs' conviction that they would have gained victory had Johnson given them a free hand. Their assumption lacked substance, however. The nature of the war--plus the air commanders' own controls--argued strongly that Rolling Thunder could never provide more than token support to Johnson's political objectives. Air leaders like Sharp, who pointed to the 1972 air campaigns as examples that Rolling Thunder could have achieved American goals earlier, failed to notice that neither the war, nor American objectives, were the same in 1972 as they were in 1965. They also failed to observe that the result of the 1972 campaigns was not the total victory that they had aimed to achieve.

¹³⁹Momyer letter to McConnell, 3 July 1969, Personal Papers of General John P. McConnell, 1969, AFHNC file number 168.7102-15.

¹⁴⁰Sharp interview, 19 May 1971, p. 24; Wheeler interview, 21 August 1969, Tape 1, p. 30; Moore interview, 22 November 1969, p. 69.

CHAPTER V

LINEBACKER I

What really matters now is how it all comes out. Both Haldeman and Henry seem to have an idea--which I think is mistaken--that even if we fail in Vietnam we can still survive politically. I have no illusions whatever on that score, however. The U. S. will not have a credible policy if we fail, and I will have to assume responsibility for that development.

Richard M. Nixon, diary entry, April 1972¹

On 20 April 1969, President Richard M. Nixon announced that he would withdraw 150,000 men from Vietnam during the next year. The decision conformed to the Vietnam policy outlined almost a year earlier by his predecessor: the United States would rely on negotiations and an improved Southern Army, supported by decreasing amounts of American military power, to end its Vietnam involvement. Lyndon Johnson had halted all bombing of the North in October 1968 in exchange for Hanoi's "agreement" to negotiate seriously and stop certain military activities.² Rolling Thunder officially ended, and the air effort devoted to it was shifted to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Except for infrequent "protective reaction strikes" in response to violations of

¹Richard M. Nixon, RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon, 2 vols. (New York: Warner Books, 1978), Vol. 2: p. 63.

²These activities were: the movement of men and supplies across the Demilitarized Zone, attacks on South Vietnam's major cities, and attacks on American reconnaissance aircraft. Wrote Johnson: "Before I made my decision [to halt the bombing], I wanted to be absolutely certain that Hanoi understood our position. . . . Our negotiators reported that the North Vietnamese would give no flat guarantees; that was in keeping with their stand that the bombing had to be ended without conditions. But they had told us that if we stopped the bombing, they would 'know what to do.' [American negotiators] . . . were confident Hanoi knew precisely what we meant and would avoid the actions that we had warned them would imperil a bombing halt." See The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969 (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), p. 518.

the October accord, the North was a refuge from American bombs from November 1968 to April 1972.³

After ten months of no progress in the public negotiations begun in Paris by the Johnson Administration, Nixon dispatched Henry A. Kissinger, his Assistant for National Security Affairs, to meet secretly with North Vietnamese representatives in August 1969. Kissinger met with delegates Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy 12 times before the North Vietnamese abruptly halted the connection in October 1971. He achieved no more than the deadlocked public talks paralleling his unannounced sessions. Nixon became convinced that Hanoi had no intention of settling the war at the conference table, a supposition confirmed by the North's massive invasion of South Vietnam in March 1972. When the Southern Army threatened to collapse before the onslaught, the President turned to air power to help achieve his vision of an honorable peace.

In certain respects, Nixon's "Linebacker" campaign against North Vietnam differed little from Johnson's Rolling Thunder. Air Force strategic bombing doctrine guided both offensives, and pilots attacked many of the same targets in Linebacker as they had earlier. Both campaigns were also political instruments. Yet the peace that Nixon sought was not the same as that pursued by Johnson, and the campaigns differed greatly in their utility as political tools. Because of revamped American political objectives and the North's decision to wage conventional war, Linebacker proved more effective than Rolling Thunder in supporting United States goals in Vietnam.

³In 1969, pilots flew 285 strike sorties against North Vietnamese targets and 144,323 against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In 1970, they flew 1,113 strike sorties against the North. See Guenter Lewy, America in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 406-07.

WAR AIMS

In October 1971, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu agreed to a new American peace proposal.⁴ Nixon's offer provided for the withdrawal of all American forces from the South in six months, a prisoner exchange by both sides, and a cease-fire in-place throughout Indochina. Thieu also agreed to an internationally-supervised election in the South, before which he and his Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky would resign to assure all candidates received equal opportunity for selection.

Nixon's proposal underscored his war aims. Although Kissinger's negotiations did not involve the South Vietnamese, the President equated "peace with honor" to an American withdrawal that did not abandon the South to an imminent Communist takeover. This objective was his positive political goal. To achieve it, Nixon applied military force in concert with his twin policies of negotiation and Vietnamization. "We were going to continue fighting until the Communists agreed to negotiate a fair and honorable peace or until the South Vietnamese were able to defend themselves on their own--whichever came first," he reflected. "The pace of withdrawal would be linked to the progress of Vietnamization, the level of enemy activity, and developments on the negotiating front."⁵

Relying on world opinion to compel Hanoi to negotiate, Nixon broadcast his October proposal in a television address on 23 January 1972. Concurrently, he publicized Kissinger's secret negotiating record. The President stressed that the United States would conclude either an agreement on military and political issues or one that would "settle only the military issues and leave the political issues to the Vietnamese alone." He repeated his pledge not to abandon South Vietnam, stating that he would not agree to a settlement that threatened the existence of a non-Communist South. His call

⁴In early 1967, South Vietnam produced a constitution based on French and American models. Thieu became the nation's first President in September 1967.

⁵Nixon, RN, 1: 506. See also Richard Nixon, No More Vietnams (New York: Arbor House, 1985), pp. 106-07.

for a return to negotiations ended with a warning. "If the enemy's answer to our peace offer is to step up their military attacks," Nixon declared, "I shall fully meet my responsibility as Commander-in-Chief of our Armed Forces to protect our remaining troops."⁶

While the goal of an "honorable" withdrawal compelled the President to apply increased force if Hanoi challenged his commitment to the South, the objective also limited the amount of force available. By January 1972, only 139,000 Americans remained in Vietnam, and this number fell to 69,000 in April. American departure thus became for Nixon his primary negative political objective as well as a positive political goal. The public's dissatisfaction with the war after the 1968 Tet Offensive necessitated the steady withdrawal of troops; Americans had responded sharply to Nixon's original plan to increase manpower slightly in the spring of 1969. To oppose Northern aggression, the President had to rely on air and naval power. Unlike Johnson, however, he had few negative objectives limiting the application of these resources.

In 1971, Nixon took steps to isolate Hanoi from its chief benefactors. Tensions between the Chinese and Soviets had accelerated sharply since the Johnson presidency. Throughout 1969, the two superpowers had fought a series of savage engagements along their mutual border. By 1971, the Soviets had 44 divisions poised on the Mongolian frontier, and Chinese troops stood ready to give battle.⁷ Both nations looked to America as a counterweight in a potential conflict. Moreover, both had individualistic needs that only the United States could satisfy. Shunned by the Soviets, the Chinese required American support to end the isolation aggravated by their

⁶Richard Nixon, "A Plan for Peace in Vietnam: The President's Address to the Nation, 23 January 1972," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 8 (31 January 1972): 120-23.

⁷Henry A. Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), p. 721.

Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, the Soviets desired an agreement on strategic nuclear weapons, and they desperately needed American grain.⁸

Nixon resolved to make the changing international climate work for him in Vietnam. Kissinger secretly visited China in early July 1971, and on the 15th, Nixon proclaimed that he would visit the country in February the following year. Three months after that disclosure, he and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev jointly announced that Nixon would travel to Moscow in May 1972 for a summit. Although neither the Chinese nor the Soviets were eager to forsake Hanoi, the goal of détente ultimately prevailed over their commitment to a Northern victory. The President gambled that the needs of both powers would prevent them from interfering with his military actions in Vietnam, and his intuition proved correct. Except for verbal protests, neither nation responded to Nixon's application of air and naval power in 1972. "At last we had a free hand to use all our force to end the war," a Kissinger aide later recalled.⁹ Despite the exaggeration, his assertion contained a large measure of truth.

Besides the freedom of action stemming from his diplomatic coups, Nixon's willingness to use force was not limited by conflicting concerns over domestic programs. The President desired public support for the war, and most Americans backed the May 1972 decision to initiate the Linebacker campaign. Unlike Viet Cong attacks inside the South, Hanoi's 12-division assault crashed across clearly-defined borders and was an blatant display of aggression. The majority of American ground troops had departed Vietnam, causing the press to focus on whether bombing and mining would cancel the Moscow summit. The Soviets' mild response, followed by the summit's resounding success, assured Nixon of popular support for an air campaign. A

⁸Ibid., p. 1134; Daniel S. Papp, Vietnam: The View from Moscow, Peking, Washington (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1981), pp. 119-22; Gabriel Kolko, Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States and Modern Historical Experience (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 402-05.

⁹Quoted in Allan E. Goodman, The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), p. 122. See also Papp, pp. 134-37.

Harris poll in September revealed that 55 percent of the public approved heavy bombing of the North.¹⁰

The public's enthusiasm for military pressure was not, however, shared by many members of Congress. Congressional moves to end the war intensified during Linebacker. On 24 July, an amendment insisting on an American withdrawal in return for a prisoner release passed the Senate by five votes before failing in the House. Nixon realized that the Congress elected in November might establish terms for withdrawal less favorable than those sought in Paris. To preclude such an occurrence, he resolved to end the war prior to January 1973.

Nixon's desire to end the war rapidly was matched by his desire to preserve an adequate base of support for an "honorable" accord. These two goals were the primary negative objectives limiting the application of air power. On the one hand, he had to conclude the war while he possessed the necessary backing to secure a favorable agreement. On the other hand, applying too much force might cause his support to vanish. "I was prepared to step up the bombing after the election," the President later commented, "but there was no way of knowing whether that would make them [the North Vietnamese] adopt a more reasonable position before the American public's patience ran out, before the bombing began to create serious problems with the Chinese and Soviets or before Congress just voted us out of the war."¹¹ While the goal of American withdrawal had little impact on the air campaign, the dual objectives of a quick end to the war and the preservation of support for it limited both the duration and the intensity of the Linebacker offensive.

¹⁰Nixon, *RN*, 136.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 21.

RATIONALE FOR AN AIR CAMPAIGN, DECEMBER 1971--MAY 1972

As Hanoi's 1972 offensive would demonstrate, Vietnamization had not yet produced a Southern Army capable of independently stopping Northern aggression. Nixon suspected that the South would need American support when the attack came, and he decided to pursue a policy of combined diplomatic and military pressure to achieve his goal of an honorable peace. After learning in late 1971 of vast Communist stockpiles near the DMZ, the President began to implement his design to preserve the Southern regime. When the North Vietnamese shelled Saigon in December, violating the terms of the 1968 bombing halt "agreement," he responded. Seventh Air Force fighters flew over 1,000 sorties between 26 and 30 December in Operation Proud Deep Alpha, attacking supply targets south of the 20th parallel.¹² Nixon hoped that the bombing would dissuade Hanoi from mounting an invasion, which American military chiefs predicted for February 1972.

On 26 January 1972, the day following his announcement of Kissinger's negotiations, the President notified the Chinese and Soviets that he would oppose a Northern attack with strong military countermeasures. China assumed a "posture of indifference" in response to the message.¹³ Because of the small amount of materiel that China gave the North, Nixon was content with the Chinese reply. Moscow expressed a tepid approval of Hanoi's actions, and the glut of Soviet goods reaching the North appeared to indicate that the Soviets would support an invasion. To limit Moscow's potential contribution, Kissinger informed Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that a Northern offensive would jeopardize the Moscow summit. Nixon visited Peking during late February, and in that month and the next American air forces did

¹²Headquarters 7th Air Force, 7 AF History of Linebacker Operations, 10 May 1972-23 October 1972, n.d., Air Force Historical Research Center (hereafter referred to as AFHRC), Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, file number K740.04-24, p. 1.

¹³Kissinger, p. 1104.

not strike the continuing build-up along the DMZ. The President did not intend to provide Hanoi with a pretense to invade.

Prior to his departure for China, Nixon bolstered American air units in Southeast Asia. At a 2 February National Security Council Meeting, he declared: "In the final analysis we cannot expect the enemy to negotiate seriously with us until he is convinced nothing can be gained by continuing the war. This will require an all-out effort on our part during the coming dry season."¹⁴ Eighteen Air Force F-4D fighters, which began deploying from Clark Air Base in the Philippines on 29 December, completed their transfer to South Vietnam and Thailand on 8 February. More significant was the deployment of 37 B-52s under Operation Bullet Shot. Eight of the bombers arrived at U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Force Base on 5 February, while the remainder went to Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, two days later. This dispatch of B-52s raised the total number of bombers in-theater to 84, with 53 at U-Tapao and 31 at Andersen.¹⁵

Hanoi responded to Nixon's 23 January appeal for renewed negotiations on 14 February, proposing any time after 15 March as an acceptable date for talks. The President suggested 20 March, and Hanoi accepted his offer on 29 February. Two weeks prior to the negotiations, the North Vietnamese announced that 20 March was no longer acceptable and demanded a postponement until 15 April. "Had we reflected," Kissinger later noted, "we might have concluded that Hanoi was gearing the resumption of negotiations to the timing of its forthcoming offensive. It wanted to have the talks take place under conditions of maximum pressure and discomfiture for us."¹⁶

¹⁴Quoted in Kissinger, p. 1100.

¹⁵AF History of Linebacker Operations, p. 3; Air War--Vietnam (New York: Arno Press, 1978), p. 125; James R. McCarthy and George B. Allison, Linebacker II: A View from the Rock (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air War College, 1979), p. 11.

¹⁶Kissinger, p. 1105.

North Vietnamese Defense Minister General Vo Nguyen Giap finally unleashed his attack on 30 March, the Thursday before Easter. Despite knowing of the impending invasion, American civil and military officials underestimated its magnitude. Giap sent three divisions, backed by 200 tanks and 130 mm heavy artillery, smashing across the DMZ into South Vietnam's Military Region I. This assault was the first of a three-pronged attack, and it signalled the movement of nine other divisions to staging areas in Laos and Cambodia. In early April, three divisions struck Military Region III from Cambodia. These units surrounded An Loc, located on the highway leading south to Saigon, on 13 April. The remaining Northern troops moved west of Kontum, causing Southern commanders to brace for an assault against the Central Highlands.

Giap's Easter Offensive strengthened Nixon's resolve to preserve South Vietnam as an independent political entity. The President considered the attack a desperate move to forestall Vietnamization. He further thought that it offered an opportunity to end the war. By defeating the assault and launching a massive counterblow against the enemy homeland, Nixon believed that he could compel Hanoi to sign a favorable accord. Kissinger concurred with the President's assessment, telling Nixon on 3 April that the United States "would get no awards for losing with moderation."¹⁷ The National Security Advisor felt that the timing of the attack revealed much about North Vietnamese intentions. He perceived Hanoi's strike coming seven months prior to the Presidential election, as an attempt at battlefield victory while political pressures prevented Nixon from interfering decisively. The blatant nature of the assault, however, provided Nixon with the public support necessary to retaliate.

To blunt the offensive, the President turned to air power. American combat troops remaining in the South received orders not to engage the enemy. Nixon intended the withdrawal of ground forces to proceed on schedule regardless of the

¹⁷Ibid., p. 1103.

invasion. In contrast, he ordered additional aircraft to Southeast Asia. Operation Constant Guard increased the total of F-4s in-theater from 183 on 30 March to 374 by 13 May. Many pilots flew missions within 72 hours after they were alerted at their bases in the United States. Between 4 April and 23 May, Bullet Shot deployments resulted in the arrival of 124 B-52s at Andersen, which brought the combined total of bombers in Guam and Thailand to 210--more than half the B-52s in Strategic Air Command (SAC). Noting the influx of bombers swamping Andersen's taxiways, one member of the 8th Air Force planning staff at Guam observed: "We kept waiting for the northern end of the island to sink." Nixon did not limit the aircraft increases to Air Force units. In April, he dispatched the carriers Constellation and Kitty Hawk to join the Foral Sea and Hancock in the Tonkin Gulf. By July, the carriers Midway and Saratoga had joined this force, giving the Navy the greatest concentration of firepower it enjoyed during the war.¹⁸

Nixon intended this array to thwart the enemy assault and to carry the war to North Vietnam proper. Air units began Operation Freedom Train against Northern supply concentrations south of the 18th parallel on 3 April. They also attacked the large number of Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) sites defending supply stockpiles north of the DMZ. "Although the United States effort was substantial," an Air Force study remarked, "the flow of personnel, supplies, and material did not diminish."¹⁹ To achieve "the necessary military impact," Nixon concluded that raids would have to

¹⁸ AF History of Linebacker Operations, pp. 4-6; Headquarters 7/13th Air Force, History of 7/13 Air Force, 1 January-31 December 1972, vol. I: Narrative (5 June 1973), AFHRC, file number K744.01, p. 104; Air War--Vietnam, pp. 115-25; Interview of Major George Thompson (Ret) by the author, Omaha, Nebraska, 27 October 1982; Peter B. Mersky and Norman Polmar, The Naval Air War in Vietnam (Annapolis: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1981), p. 195. The Navy possessed 300 attack aircraft on four carriers by mid-April. See "The New Air War in Vietnam," US News and World Report, 24 April 1972, p. 15.

¹⁹ Uncoordinated Draft: Linebacker Study, MACV (20 January 1973), AFHRC, file number K712.041-19, chap. 2, p. 2.

strike near Hanoi and Haiphong.²⁰ He believed that strikes by B-52s, with their enormous 30-ton bomb loads, would prove more effective against supply depots in the heartland than would attacks by fighters. In addition, sending the bombers north was, in Kissinger's words, "a warning that things might get out of hand if the offensive did not stop."²¹ B-52s had appeared over Haiphong only once, and they had never flown against Hanoi. On 16 April, 20 bombers from the 307th Strategic Wing at U-Tapao attacked Haiphong's oil storage facilities in Operation Freedom Torch Bravo. B-52s flew five missions against the North during April, all flown by the 307th.

At the end of the month, Nixon approved raids on targets south of 20 degrees 25 minutes North Latitude. Kissinger viewed the application of such force necessary "for the political goal of bringing matters to a head and overawing outside intervention." He elaborated: "If we wanted to force a diplomatic solution, we had to create an impression of implacable determination to prevail; only this would bring about either active Soviet assistance in settling the war or else Soviet acquiescence in our mounting military pressures, on which we were determined should diplomacy fail."²²

The Soviets responded to the American aerial assault, and Nixon's accompanying refusal to continue public negotiations, by inviting Kissinger to Moscow to discuss the war's escalation. Although Dobrynin extended this invitation on 10 April, Moscow did not withdraw the offer after the 16 April raid on Haiphong accidentally hit four Soviet ships. Kissinger thought that the Soviets' enthusiasm for the summit would persuade them to restrain Hanoi and direct their ally to negotiate. Nixon went further in his estimation of the summit's importance to the Soviets, directing Kissinger not to discuss it until they pledged to help end the war. Both agreed that military pressure on

²⁰Nixon, RN, 2: 64.

²¹Kissinger, p. 1118.

²²Ibid., p. 1116.

the North was necessary while applying diplomatic pressure on the Soviets, and bombing continued during Kissinger's 20-24 April visit. Brezhnev refused to compel Hanoi to end its offensive, but he assisted in re-establishing Kissinger's negotiations. The National Security Advisor agreed that American delegates would attend a public negotiating session on 27 April, provided that Le Duc Tho met with him for secret talks on 2 May. To Kissinger, the importance of his April trip was that "the USSR engaged itself in the [negotiating] process in a manner that worked to our advantage."²³

Despite Kissinger's Moscow journey, Le Duc Tho appeared to hold the upper hand at the 2 May meeting. Brezhnev's assistance in renewing the talks, plus Kissinger's 22 April pledge that aircraft would not strike Hanoi and Haiphong pending the session, indicated that serious negotiations might result. Nixon had refused to renew discussions until after the Soviets made clear their position. He also wanted to avoid giving the North Vietnamese a chance to negotiate from strength. On 24 April, however, Giap attacked Kontum in the third phase of his offensive. A subsequent assault against Military Region I led to the panicking of many South Vietnamese units, and on 1 May the North Vietnamese captured Quang Tri, their first provincial capital in the South.

Although impressive, Hanoi's battlefield achievements could not persuade Nixon to cancel the 2 May meeting. Such a move conflicted with his basic strategy of balancing diplomacy and military force. Nixon planned to counter the North's latest attacks with air power--on 30 April he sent Kissinger a memorandum ordering a three-day series of B-52 strikes against Hanoi and Haiphong beginning 5 May²⁴--but he would not apply greater force until after Le Duc Tho proved intransigent at the bargaining table. The President wanted America's need to retaliate perceived as obvious, especially by the Soviets. Kissinger had warned Brezhnev that the United

²³Ibid., pp. 1147. See pages 1118-1164 for Kissinger's detailed evaluation of his trip to Moscow. Nixon's thoughts on the trip appear in RN, 2: 61-68.

²⁴Kissinger, p. 1168.

States would answer militarily should the 2 May session fail. Nixon told his advisor to "be brutally frank" with the North Vietnamese delegation, "particularly in tone." He further directed: "In a nutshell you should tell them that they have violated all understandings, they [have] stepped up the war, they have refused to negotiate seriously. As a result, the President has had enough and now you have only one message to give them --Settle or else!"²⁵

At the 2 May meeting, Le Duc Tho and Foreign Minister Xuan Thuy refused to respond to Nixon's 23 January peace proposal. Spending much of the session reading Hanoi's publicly-announced war aims, the Northern delegates called for the immediate resignation of President Thieu and a halt to Vietnamization. Kissinger's attempt to determine whether Hanoi would accept a military settlement, as opposed to a combined military-political accord, ended in failure. "What the 2 May meeting revealed," Kissinger later commented, "was Hanoi's conviction that it was so close to victory that it no longer needed even the pretense of a negotiation."²⁶ The talks adjourned after three hours, making them one of the briefest sessions conducted between Kissinger and Tho.

After returning from Paris, the National Security Advisor met with the President to decide upon a proper response to Hanoi's intransigence. Both agreed that only a massive shock could deter the North Vietnamese from their goal of total victory. Kissinger felt that the "one-shot" nature of Nixon's desired B-52 raids would not dissuade Hanoi; further, the attacks might produce severe domestic criticism. Major General Alexander Haig, Kissinger's military assistant, had submitted a plan that the National Security Advisor thought was a suitable means of retaliation. Haig's design called for the bombing of all Northern military targets except those bordering China and for the mining of ports. The proposal relied on fighter interdiction to close the

²⁵Nixon, RN, 2: 70.

²⁶Kissinger, p. 1173.

enemy's overland supply routes. Nixon supported the scheme, and on 4 May Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer began drafting the orders that resulted in Operation Linebacker I.

The President announced the escalation in a television address on 8 May, the earliest date Moorer had given for the initiation of mining. He stated:

There are only two issues left for us in this war. First, in the face of a massive invasion do we stand by, jeopardize the lives of 60,000 Americans, and leave the South Vietnamese to a long night of terror? This will not happen. We shall do whatever is required to safeguard American lives and American honor.

Second, in the face of complete intransigence at the conference table do we join with our enemy to install a Communist government in South Vietnam? This, too, will not happen. We will not cross the line from generosity to treachery.²⁷

Nixon eschewed the options of immediate American withdrawal and continued negotiations. The former course would remove bargaining leverage needed for the return of American prisoners, while the second would allow the enemy offensive to go unchecked. "I therefore concluded," he remarked, "that Hanoi must be denied the weapons and supplies it needs to continue the aggression."²⁸ Aircraft would mine Northern ports and interdict lines of communication until Hanoi agreed to release American prisoners and to support an internationally-supervised in-place cease-fire. Once Hanoi fulfilled these conditions, a complete American withdrawal from Vietnam would occur within four months.

While certain of the need to escalate, the President worried that his decision might provoke the Soviets. Nixon sent a personal letter to Brezhnev explaining his action prior to the public announcement, and on 8 May he reiterated that "these actions are not directed against any other nation."²⁹ The President and his advisors thought that the Soviets would not intervene, yet many officials believed that they would

²⁷Richard Nixon, "The Situation in Southeast Asia: the President's Address to the Nation, 8 May 1972," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 8 (15 May 1972), p. 839.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 846.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 841.

express their disapproval by canceling the summit. Kissinger received Dobrynin's official protest on 10 May, but the low-keyed statement contained no mention of the conference. Taken aback, Kissinger asked the ambassador if planning for the meeting should continue. Dobrynin answered that the summit was not an issue, observing, "You have handled a difficult situation uncommonly well."³⁰ Soviet merchant ships docked at Haiphong remained there, and those in route to the port turned back. Nixon's gamble that the Soviets' desire for detente outweighed their zeal for Hanoi's military success had succeeded.

Having received Soviet acquiescence, Nixon was anxious to punish the North Vietnamese. "I intend to stop at nothing to bring the enemy to his knees," the President informed Kissinger. Nixon urged his military chiefs to "recommend action which is very strong, threatening, and effective," although Kissinger acknowledged that curtailing Northern supplies would require time. Still, the National Security Advisor believed that increased military pressure, together with the decreasing commitment from Moscow, might compel Hanoi to accept the 8 May peace proposal. By sending massive doses of air power against the Northern heartland, Nixon substantiated his claim that he would not abandon Saigon. Moreover, the attacks demonstrated that he was no longer willing to engage in inconclusive negotiations.³¹

In response to Nixon's directive, air chiefs designed a campaign to destroy the North's war-making capability. Admiral Moorer announced that Linebacker's threefold objective was to: "(a) destroy war material already in North Vietnam, (b) to the extent possible, prevent the flow of war material already in Vietnam, and (c) interdict the flow of troops and material from the north into combat areas, South

³⁰Quoted in RN, 2: 86.

³¹Nixon, RN, 2: 85-86; Henry Kissinger, "News Conference 9 May 1972," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 8 (15 May 1972), p. 346; Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1181; Donaldson D. Frizzell, "Air Power and Negotiation in 1972," in The Lessons of Vietnam, eds. W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, 1977), p. 164.

Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia." As in Rolling Thunder, the Joint Chiefs targeted what they considered the vital components of the North's industrial apparatus, and once more they emphasized the transportation system. Targets included rail lines and road networks, bridges, railroad yards, equipment repair facilities, petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) storage areas, and thermal power plants. Unlike Rolling Thunder, however, the chiefs received authority to attack the various targets simultaneously. They could also approve strikes on enemy defenses.³²

The Navy's mining operation complemented the air campaign's assault on the North's overland supply routes. With mining, air commanders believed that Linebacker could halt Hanoi's logistical flow. They concurred with Kissinger's speculation that their efforts would take time to erode Northern resources. Air strikes and mining could limit the amount of materiel entering North Vietnam, but the nation had stockpiled goods for over three years virtually unhindered. Observed Kissinger: "The President had gained some maneuvering room with his bold decision to bomb and mine, but if it did not bring results fairly quickly, it would be increasingly attacked as a 'failure.' The demands for 'political' alternatives would mount."³³

CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

On the morning of 10 May, the initial strike of the new bombing campaign occurred under the designation "Rolling Thunder Alpha"; the name "Linebacker" had not yet reached field units. Thirty-two F-4s from Thai bases attacked one of Rolling Thunder's most frequently bombed targets, Hanoi's Paul Doumer Bridge. They also struck the city's Yen Vien Railroad Yard. Pilots dropped 29 laser and electro-optically-

³²Headquarters 8th Air Force, History of Eighth Air Force, 1 July 1972-30 June 1973, vol. I: Narrative (23 August 1974), AFHRC file number K520.01, p. 147; Uncoordinated Draft: Linebacker Study, MACV, chap. 2, p. 2; "How Important is Airpower in Achieving U.S. Objectives in Southeast Asia?" Air Force Policy Letter for Commanders (1 June 1972), p. 3.

³³Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1306.

guided "smart" bombs on the bridge and 84 conventional bombs on the marshalling yard, heavily damaging both targets. Fifty-eight additional aircraft supported the raid by performing reconnaissance, SAM suppression, escort, and electronic countermeasures (ECM).³⁴

Linebacker's first raid typified attacks during the next three months. Large numbers of support aircraft accompanied a relatively small number of strike aircraft to the target, with the strike/support ratio varying according to the severity of enemy defenses. The type of target determined the number of strike aircraft required. Against area targets such as railroad yards and storage facilities, where the risk of civilian casualties was minimal, fighters dropped conventional "iron" bombs. These raids required a much higher strike sortie rate to assure success than did attacks on precision targets. Precision targets demanded fewer strike sorties because of a technological advance perfected after Rolling Thunder--the "smart" bomb. Using laser or electro-optical guidance, these bombs could hit targets in heavily-populated areas with remarkable accuracy. On 26 May, a single flight of F-4s dropped laser-guided bombs that destroyed the Son Tay warehouse and storage area. The three buildings attacked measured 300 by 260 feet, 260 by 145 feet, and 210 by 65 feet. The F-4s dropped only three bombs, and all hit their respective targets. "Laser-guided bombs . . . revolutionized tactical bombing," asserted Air Force Major General Eugene L. Hudson, 7th Air Force Director of Intelligence. Since most Linebacker targets required precision ordnance, the number of strike aircraft per mission remained low. Until August, a raid's strike force averaged 8-12 aircraft.³⁵

While Air Force and Navy fighters flew most Linebacker missions, B-52s also participated in the campaign. Kissinger dissuaded Nixon from sending large numbers

³⁴ AF History of Linebacker Operations, pp. 7-10.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 20; Headquarters PACAF, Linebacker: Overview of the First 120 Days (27 September 1973), AFHRC, file number X717.0614-42, pp. 35-37; Major General Eugene L. Hudson, End of Tour Report (20 April 1973), AFHRC, file number X740.131, p. 15; Uncoordinated Draft Linebacker Study, MACV, chap. 3, p. 1.

of bombers northward. The National Security Advisor believed that large-scale B-52 raids might cause a domestic outcry, and he further thought that such attacks were unnecessary. B-52s struck Northern targets near the DMZ in their first Linebacker mission on 8 June, and they averaged 30 sorties a day over the North through October. Targets included storage areas and lines of communication. As during Rolling Thunder, most bomber missions occurred over the South in support of ground forces.³⁶

By early June, Giap's offensive had begun to sputter, and Kissinger deemed that the time was ripe for renewed negotiations. "The war had to be ended," he wrote, "by a demonstration that our government was in control of events, and this required maintaining the diplomatic initiative."³⁷ Hanoi accepted the proposal for private talks to reconvene on 19 July. Unlike prior to the 2 May meeting, Nixon did not curtail bombing. He asserted: "It has always been my theory that in dealing with these very pragmatic men . . . who lead Communist nations, that they respect strength--not belligerence but strength--and at least that is the way I am always going to approach it, and I think it is going to be successful in the end."³⁸

Despite sanctioning negotiations, the President was less than enthusiastic about returning to the bargaining table. With the growing certainty of re-election, he had little domestic reason to resume the talks. Kissinger felt that as re-election became more obvious, Nixon could induce Hanoi to settle before receiving a renewed mandate. Yet, according to the National Security Advisor, the President feared that the North Vietnamese would accept his 8 May peace proposal. Nixon believed that Hanoi's acceptance would erode the conservative Republican support that he felt was necessary for a successful presidency. "Nixon saw no possibility of progress until after the

³⁶History of Eighth Air Force, 1 July 1972-30 June 1973, vol. 1: Narrative, pp. 148-49.

³⁷Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1309.

³⁸Richard Nixon, "Turning the Battle Around with Airpower," Air Force Policy Letters for Commanders (15 July 1972), p. 1.

election and probably did not even desire it" Kissinger remarked. "Even then, he preferred another escalation before sitting down to negotiate."³⁹

Kissinger met with Le Duc Tho three times between 19 July and 14 August. The insolent tone that Tho presented at the 2 May meeting had disappeared, and he conceded points that had highlighted his negotiating position since the start of talks. He relinquished his call for President Thieu's immediate removal. He also abandoned the demand for an unconditional deadline on the withdrawal of American forces. Still, Tho continued to press for a coalition government, with substantial Communist representation, in the South. Nixon was discouraged by the sessions, writing on Kissinger's report of the 14 August meeting that he did not believe successful negotiations could occur until after the election. "We have reached the stage where the mere fact of private talks helps us very little--if at all," he concluded.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, he condoned Kissinger's scheduling of the next round of negotiations for 15 September, after the National Security Advisor met with Thieu in Saigon.

In the midst of Kissinger's renewed talks, Nixon enlarged the air campaign. On 2 August, the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., notified his subordinate commanders that Linebacker would begin to hit the North harder:

There is growing concern here and in Washington that insufficient effort is being applied against the North Vietnamese heartland. . . . To signal Hanoi in the strongest way possible that our air presence over their country will not diminish, I wish to intensify the air campaign in Northern NVN [North Vietnam].⁴¹

The admiral ordered three of the six carriers in the Tonkin Gulf to devote all of their sorties to Linebacker. Half of those missions would occur in Route Package 6B, the

³⁹Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1308. Original emphasis.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 1319. Original emphasis.

⁴¹Message, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV, CINCPACAF, CINCPACFLT, CINCSAC, 090225Z Aug 1972, in Message Traffic, May-December 1972, AFHRC, file number K168.06-229.

Navy's northernmost zone of operations.⁴² McCain directed the Air Force to schedule a minimum of 48 strike sorties a day in its two northern areas of responsibility, Route Packages 3 and 6A. He also called for periodic B-52 strikes into northern North Vietnam, although this was a request of the Commander-in-Chief, Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC) rather than an order, as McCain had no operational control over SAC assets.

From 9 August until 16 October, Air Force planners scheduled 48 strike sorties a day into Route Packages 3 and 6A. Because of the excellent results achieved with smart bombs, commanders attempted to conduct as many precision raids as possible. A shortage of guidance pods for laser-guided bombs prevented many precision attacks, however, and often a third of the strike force carried conventional ordnance. Foul weather further hampered attacks, causing only 16 missions to fly in August. In September the weather improved. Compared to Linebacker's previous months, four times as many strike aircraft flew in September, making it the most productive month of the campaign. Seventh Air Force flew 111 laser-guided bomb sorties, and most attacks destroyed their targets. Pilots perfected LORAN (Long Range Navigation) bomb delivery techniques, allowing them to fly missions normally weather-canceled. The 25 September arrival of 48 F-111s in Thailand provided air commanders with an additional means of striking the enemy. Capable of flying supersonically at tree-top level in darkness and poor weather, F-111s attacked in increasing numbers until by 13 October they accounted for half the Air Force's strikes in the heartland. "The mere presence of 24 sorties a night striking at random and without warning throughout North Vietnam must have caused considerable consternation," Major General Hudson surmised. One of the few F-111 pilots shot down

⁴²See Chapter IV, pp. 176-77, for a discussion of the Route Package system.

remembered that a guard approached him, declaring, "You F-111." He then made a flat, sweeping motion with his hand, and in an awed tone said, "Whoosh!"⁴³

Interdiction remained the thrust of the air offensive during its final two months. New CINCPAC Admiral Noel A. M. Gayler's 7 October statement of bombing objectives mirrored Admiral Moorer's May declaration. Targets associated with resupply from China, such as rail lines and truck routes, and the electric power system received the highest priority. In mid-October Gayler initiated joint Air Force/Navy strikes against the interior area bordered by the vital Northeast and Northwest Railroads. His attempt to eliminate the inefficiency stemming from the Route Package system had little chance for success, however. On 23 October, Nixon ended Linebacker and halted all bombing north of the 20th parallel.⁴⁴

Kissinger's progress during the September and October rounds of negotiations resulted in the President's decision to curtail bombing. The breakthrough occurred on 8 October when Tho dropped the demand for a Southern coalition government and agreed to an in-place cease-fire followed by the withdrawal of American troops. The National Security Advisor had long believed that the best prospects for settlement lay in separating military from political issues to achieve a strictly military accord like that gained in Korea. "After four years of implacable insistence that we dismantle the political structure of our ally and replace it with a coalition government," Kissinger observed, "Hanoi had now essentially given up its political demands."⁴⁵

⁴³AF History of Linebacker Operations, pp. 25-32; Hudson, p. 18; John Morrocco, Rain of Fire (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), p. 154.

⁴⁴Message, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, CINCPACFLT, 17110Z Oct 1972, in Message Traffic, May-December 1972; "CNA Working Paper: Preliminary Summary of Linebacker Operations" (14 February 1973), pp. 5-6, in USAF Operations in Southeast Asia, Backup Documentation 1971-1973, AFHRC, file number K239.031-53.

⁴⁵Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1343-44.

Kissinger had notified Tho that bombing would decrease during the final phase of negotiations. On 13 October Nixon reduced the number of daily attack sorties to 200 and restricted the scope of B-52 operations. Yet this decrease produced no reduction of Air Force sorties sent against the Northern heartland. Three days later, as Kissinger journeyed from Washington for a "final" negotiating session, Nixon cut the number of daily strikes to 150. This measure reduced Air Force strike sorties against Route Packages 5 and 6A by only ten. After meeting with Kuan Thuy on the 17th, Kissinger flew to Saigon to obtain President Thieu's concurrence on the settlement. Thieu's opposition to certain parts of the agreement, notably the provision allowing Northern troops to remain in the South, caused Nixon to request one more meeting between Tho and Kissinger. "As a token of good will," the President suspended attacks above the 20th parallel. "But," he announced, "there was to be no bombing halt until the agreement was signed. I was not going to be taken in by the mere prospect of an agreement as Johnson had been in 1968."⁴⁶

CONTROLS ON LINEBACKER

In terms of political controls, the campaign ending on 23 October differed in many respects from Rolling Thunder. Like Rolling Thunder, however, Linebacker's political controls flowed from the President's negative goals. Nixon initially prohibited raids within 30 miles of the Chinese border and within ten miles of Hanoi and Haiphong. Moscow's low-keyed response to the President's May escalation limited the extent of these restrictions. By 8 June airstrikes had occurred 15 miles from China, and geographical restrictions on attacks near Hanoi and Haiphong vanished. An Air Force

⁴⁶Nixon, RN, 2: 192-93, 204-05; 7 AF History of Linebacker Operations, p. 32. While the suspension of bombing north of the 20th parallel may have partly resulted from Nixon's "good will," other considerations were of equal importance. Nixon could not approve an accord without the support of Thieu, but Hanoi had agreed to the demands listed in the President's 8 May speech. Thus, Nixon curtailed, rather than ended, the bombing "as promised." See this chapter, pp. 237-39.

report noted that "the prevailing authority to strike almost any valid military target during LINEBACKER was in sharp contrast to the extensive and vacillating restrictions in existence during ROLLING THUNDER." Nixon and the Joint Chiefs approved a master target list from which subordinates designed individual attacks. Rarely did the Joint Chiefs direct strikes against specific targets, and field commanders received authority to conduct raids systematically rather than piecemeal. Seventh Air Force Commander General John W. Vogt, Jr., later confirmed that he had the authority to direct the Air Force portion of Linebacker effectively.⁴⁷

Nixon prohibited attacks threatening civilian casualties, and this restriction complemented his air commanders' own desires. The original Linebacker directive stated: "It is essential that strike forces exercise care in weapons selection to minimize civilian casualties and avoid third country shipping, known or suspected PW (Prisoner of War) camps, hospitals, and religious shrines." While similar limitations prevailed during Rolling Thunder, smart bombs did much to offset this restriction during Linebacker. Nixon forbade the bombing of dams "because the results in terms of civilian casualties would be extraordinary"; using guided ordnance, a flight of F-4s destroyed the generator of the Lang Chi Hydroelectric Plant, leaving the dam 50 feet away unscathed. Vogt was proud of 7th Air Force's efforts to avoid civilian losses and remarked that his pilots were always conscious of that goal.⁴⁸

Many command and control problems unresolved from Rolling Thunder hindered Linebacker. Because of the parochial concerns of Air Force and Navy leaders,

⁴⁷Headquarters PACAF, Corona Harvest: The USAF in Southeast Asia, 1970-1973: Lessons Learned and Recommendations: A Compendium (16 June 1973), AFHRC, file number K717.0423-11, p. 64; Lewy, p. 416; Juan M. Vasquez, "Pentagon Confident of Bombing Effect," The New York Times, 9 June 1972; Frizzell, p. 165; 7 AF History of Linebacker Operations, p. 20; Robert N. Ginsburgh, "North Vietnam--Air Power," Vital Speeches of the Day 38 (15 September 1972), p. 734; USAF Oral History Interview of General John W. Vogt, Jr. by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur W. McCants, Jr. and Dr. James C. Rasdorff, 8-9 August 1978, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-1093, p. 64.

⁴⁸History of Eighth Air Force, 1 July 1972-30 June 1973, vol. I: Narrative, p. 149; Hudson, p. 16; Vogt interview, 8-9 August 1978, pp. 139, 147.

Nixon named no overall air commander and CINCPAC retained the Route Package system. "Despite repeated efforts to fully integrate the US effort against North Vietnam," commented an Air Force study, "US air resources conducted relatively independent air operations against separate geographical sections of North Vietnam." The tremendous number of Air Force sorties flying over the Tonkin Gulf led to oversaturated airspace, resulting in a joint Air Force/Navy conference in July. Participants established altitude blocks separating the two services' flights, although time separation between strikes remained an informal agreement. The campaign ended before Admiral Gayler's attempt to integrate flights could bear fruit. Still, Vogt did not object to the Route Package system, believing that it "saved . . . a great deal of detailed coordination." He did oppose Linebacker's overlapping chain of command. Vogt reported in turn to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Air Forces (CINCPACAF) and CINCPAC, and he received added guidance from the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. To employ B-52s, he had to coordinate with either the Joint Chiefs or CINCPAC, who sometimes received targeting authority for the bombers, and with CINCSAC, who retained control of the time and weight of B-52 strikes. "I would much have preferred," he later declared, "to have control of the whole air situation myself."⁴⁹

Northern air defenses provided the most obvious operational control on the campaign. MiG fighter totals in May 1972 had increased to 204, of which 93 were MiG-21s. SAM sites numbered 300. Enemy defenses claimed 44 Air Force aircraft during Linebacker, and in June MiGs alone downed seven Air Force fighters while losing only two of their own number. Despite these losses, air commanders did not launch a systematic effort against the MiGs. The reason for this decision, an air chief

⁴⁹Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1112; Corona Harvest: The USAF in Southeast Asia, 1970-1973, pp. 116-17; 7 AF History of Linebacker Operations, p. 23; William W. Momyer, Air Power in Three Wars (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 103-05; Vogt interview, 8-9 August 1978, pp. 116-22.

commented, was "simply that we have been given objectives of far greater priority and we are gaining these objectives without significant hindrance by the North Vietnamese fighters." He noted with satisfaction that MiGs "have not been able to prevent our strike aircraft from reaching their targets in a single instance." Yet he was probably unaware that SAC's directives for B-52s "provided for breaking off or diverting a mission if the anticipated or encountered threat became severe enough."⁵⁰

The Air Force did take action to thwart enemy defenses. At the end of July, the "Teaball" Weapons Control Center at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, began operations, providing pilots over the North with a combination of radar and intelligence information. Teaball negated the MiGs' ground radar advantage, and helped produce an Air Force-to-MiG kill ratio of 5 to 19 from 1 August through 15 October, as compared to an 18 to 24 ratio from 1 February through 31 July. The Air Force also devised "Hunter-Killer" teams, comprised of two F-105 "hunters" and two F-4 "killers," to find and destroy enemy radars. The effectiveness of both Teaball and the Hunter-Killer teams reduced the number of support aircraft needed for strike defense, which in turn allowed many support aircraft to become attackers after the August increase in strike sorties.⁵¹

Pilot inexperience led to many losses during Linebacker's first three months. Because of the three year ban on flights north of the 20th parallel, few pilots had previously flown in Route Packages 5 and 6A. To increase an awareness of enemy tactics, mission critique conferences began on 10 July at 7th Air Force Headquarters, and the minutes of these sessions went to all field units. Vogt ordered specific squadrons to specialize in particular tasks to achieve the maximum efficiency of his

⁵⁰7 AF History of Linebacker Operations, pp. 14, 16; Air War--Vietnam, p. 267; Edgar Ulamer, "Air Power Halts an Invasion," Air Force, September 1972, p. 71; McCarthy and Allison, p. 30.

⁵¹7 AF History of Linebacker Operations, pp. 48, 53.

fighter force. As a result, the 3th Tactical Fighter wing became the exclusive users of laser-guided ordnance.⁵²

Passive defenses also hampered Linebacker. The Communists employed anti-interdiction techniques developed during Rolling Thunder, although the conventional nature of the Easter Offensive produced much higher supply needs than before. Pilots stymied rail traffic from China, forcing the enemy to rely on truck convoys. The North Vietnamese constructed a pipeline, from China through Laos to South Vietnam, that supplied nearly 30,000 metric tons of oil a month. The redundancy of both the road network and the oil pipeline made the two targets difficult to attack successfully. Hanoi countered efforts to destroy its thermal power capability by using thousands of portable generators to operate war machinery and radars. Passive measures proved especially effective during the early phase of Linebacker when the South appeared near collapse. Air commanders diverted many missions to fly close air support for Southern ground troops and did not possess the necessary aircraft to conduct heavy interdiction of the North as well. Even with the August bombing increases, passive defenses continued to plague Linebacker.⁵³

Weather was an additional operational control, and overcast skies prevented smart bomb delivery. While the Navy's A-6 Intruder and the increasing use of B-52s permitted some bombing during adverse weather, commanders searched for other means to overcome this limitation. General Vogt's summer requirement for pilots to gain familiarity with LORAN bombing techniques paid dividends when monsoons appeared in August. Beginning in that month, Air Force planners scheduled two separate Linebacker missions daily, and each had the option of guided or unguided munitions. This planning procedure eliminated many maintenance problems caused

⁵²Ibid., pp. 21, 65.

⁵³Joseph Kraft, "Letter from Hanoi," The New Yorker, 12 August 1972, p. 63; Ulsamer, p. 66; Corona Harvest: The USAF in Southeast Asia, 1970-1973, pp. 82-83; "Air War against the North--Tougher than Anyone Realizes," US News and World Report, 21 August 1972, p. 32.

by poor weather. The F-111's arrival in late September offered another boost to Linebacker's all-weather bombing capability.

BOMBING RESULTS

DAMAGE INFLICTED

From April through October 1972, 155,548 tons of bombs fell on North Vietnam, slightly more than one-fourth the tonnage dropped during Rolling Thunder. "More damage was done to the North Vietnamese lines of communication during Linebacker than during all our previous efforts," acknowledged Vogt. Smart bombs inflicted most of the destruction, and the Northeast and Northwest Railroads each possessed an average of 15 wrecked bridges throughout the campaign. Interdiction reduced overland imports from 160,000 tons to 30,000 tons a month, while mining decreased seaborne imports from over 250,000 tons a month to near zero. The Chinese heightened the effectiveness of both efforts. For three weeks following the mining of Northern ports, they refused to ship any goods to North Vietnam, and they denied the transport of Soviet goods across their territory for three months. "This was just to let the North Vietnamese know who lived on their border," commented Walt W. Rostow, who remained in contact with Kissinger after serving as Johnson's National Security Advisor.⁵⁴

The conventional nature of the Easter Offensive produced materiel needs that far exceeded those previously required by Communist forces. For the first time in the war, the North Vietnamese employed large numbers of tanks and heavy cannon in an assault resembling the blitzkrieg of World War II. Vast amounts of ammunition and

⁵⁴Lewy, p. 411; 7 AF History of Linebacker Operations, p. 75; Linebacker: Overview of the First 120 Days, p. 20; US House, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on DOD, DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, Hearings, 93rd Cong., 1st sess., 9-18 January 1973, p. 43; Ginsburgh, p. 734; Interview of Walt W. Rostow by the author, Austin, Texas, 23 May 1986.

oil were essential to the success of the invasion, and the transport and storage of such goods were especially vulnerable to air attack. "You cannot refuel T-54 tanks with gasoline out of water bottles carried on bicycles," observed British military authority Sir Robert Thompson. In addition, Communist troops could not obtain necessary foodstuffs from the South, and a poor rice harvest affected food supplies throughout the North. After the reopening of Haiphong in 1973, the North imported 1,000,000 tons of grain--a three months' supply of their current ration.⁵⁵

By the end of Linebacker, aircraft had destroyed almost all fixed oil storage facilities and 70 percent of the electric power generating capacity. Hanoi's portable generators provided current only to military facilities. A correspondent in the capital noted that "the industrial power plant for the city has been destroyed, and the electric current that emanates from the remaining power plant is feeble and subject to repeated failure." The attacks disrupted the lives of Hanoi's inhabitants, causing between 20 and 40 percent of the city's populace to evacuate. Those who remained found little occasion to gather socially. All theaters and museums closed, and Catholic priests conducted mass at 4:30 A. M. Perhaps the greatest indicator of how bombing affected civilians came from Hanoi's national radio. Typical broadcast topics during Linebacker included: "How to Achieve High Yield in Rice Cultivation despite the Bombing" and "How Young People in the Country Should Receive City Children Being Evacuated."⁵⁶

EFFECTIVENESS IN ACHIEVING POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

Despite Linebacker's failure to produce a settlement, its damage helped compel Northern leaders to abandon their goal of an immediate military takeover and

⁵⁵Robert Thompson in *Lessons of Vietnam*, pp. 104-05.

⁵⁶Kraft, pp. 58-65; Joseph Fromm, "Why Hanoi Came to Realize It Could Not Hope to Win," *US News and World Report*, 6 November 1972, p. 19. Fromm's article is an interview with British authority on North Vietnam Patrick J. Honey.

contributed to their concessions at the bargaining table. The six men comprising North Vietnam's Politburo, First Secretary Le Duan, National Assembly Chairman Truong Chinh, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, and Secretariat members Pham Hung and Le Duc Tho, had committed themselves to unifying a country that they considered arbitrarily divided. The six viewed elimination of the South Vietnamese government as an absolute prerequisite for unification, yet they did not agree on the method to achieve the fusion. Truong Chinh stressed political measures, emphasizing a protracted war in the South to accomplish the goal. Le Duan advocated large-scale military action, arguing that after the Southern defeat political unification could occur at leisure. Following the 1968 Tet Offensive's failure, the Politburo heeded Truong Chinh's policy of protracted war and strengthened the Northern Army. By late 1970, Hanoi felt that its rear areas were secure, and Le Duan's call for an invasion met with approval.⁵⁷

Northern leaders found many reasons to justify an assault. A strategy of protracted war risked both manpower shortages and economic stagnation. The Northern Army suffered from low morale, and the Laotian invasion early in 1971 indicated that Vietnamization had bolstered Southern combat capability. The continuing withdrawal of American troops increased the chances of Nixon's re-election, which Northern leaders thought would give him greater freedom of action in Vietnam. They also believed that a successful invasion while some Americans remained would not only discredit Vietnamization but would also serve as a defeat for the United States. The capture of additional Americans would provide negotiating leverage, although the offensive's goal was complete victory. Despite the espousal of Northern editor Hong

⁵⁷Fromm, p. 18; Robert F. Rogers, "Risk-Taking in Hanoi's War Policy: An Analysis of Militancy versus Manipulation in a Communist Party-State's Behavior in a Conflict," (Ph. D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 1974), pp. 73, 189-94; Le Duan, "Analysis of Revolutionary Strategy," (February 1970) in Gareth Porter, ed., Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions, 2 vols. (Stamfordville, NY: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, Inc., 1979), Vol. 2: pp. 337-39; Kolko, pp. 368-76.

Chuong that "we are ready to fight [the United States] for a century." Communist leaders sought success in less time. All were over 60 and had pursued the goal of unification for most of their lives. The prospect of dying with the dream unfulfilled, as had Ho Chi Minh, loomed before them. Consequently, Robert Thompson remarked, "they were . . . old men in a hurry."⁵⁸

Throughout 1971, North Vietnam prepared for the assault. Le Duan visited Moscow in the spring to secure weaponry and transport, and in the summer the Politburo issued the invasion order. Having committed themselves to the offensive, Northern leaders shunned Nixon's offer for secret negotiations, and they denounced the President's October proposal. Nguyen Van Tien, one of Hanoi's delegates to the public talks in Paris, told California Congressman Robert L. Leggett on 26 February 1972 that no proposal was reasonable as long as the Thieu government remained in power. Tien demanded formation of a coalition government, followed by general elections, after which a cease-fire could occur. Without the simultaneous settlement of military and political questions, Tien argued, a lasting peace in South Vietnam was impossible.⁵⁹

Kissinger realized Hanoi's resolve when the secret negotiations finally resumed on 2 May. "Even if pressed by Moscow," he later asserted, "Hanoi would want to play to the end its current offensive, to which it was fully committed, to improve its bargaining position."⁶⁰ The Politburo considered negotiation Nixon's primary recourse to the assault. A Communist Party journal announced in April:

Because of its ignominious defeats the United States does not dare re-escalate the war no matter how disastrous the consequences of this offensive and how great the danger of collapse will be for the puppet

⁵⁸Robert Thompson, *Peace Is Not at Hand* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1974), pp. 86-89, 95-96; Frizzell, p. 158; CINCPAC, "Current Situation in North Vietnam" (21 July 1972), point paper in *Paye Aegis and other Messages, June 1971-June 1972*, AFHRC, file number K717.03-219, vol. 5; Kraft, p. 66; Kolko, p. 422.

⁵⁹Thompson, *Peace Is Not at Hand*, pp. 89-93; Letter from Congressman Robert L. Leggett to General John D. Ryan, 10 March 1972, in *General John D. Ryan Congressional Correspondence, February-December 1972*, AFHRC, file number K168.7085-152.

⁶⁰Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1156-57.

[South Vietnamese] army. . . . We will force the enemy to acknowledge his defeat and accept a political settlement on our terms.⁶¹

Moscow's role in reinitiating Kissinger's secret talks indicated that the Soviets would provide little additional aid to Hanoi. At this juncture, however, the North Vietnamese had stockpiled enough goods to support their drive south. Seemingly on the brink of victory, Le Duc Tho exuded the confidence of Hanoi's leadership by curtly dismissing Kissinger's proposals.

Nixon's massive application of air and sea power shocked Northern leaders. Moreover, Linebacker and the tactical air campaign in the South combined with the increasing resistance of the Southern Army to negate any chance that the Easter Offensive had to produce victory. American intelligence experts estimated that air power alone had cost the North Vietnamese 120,000 casualties by August, and Giap had sent every division save one to fight in the South.⁶² The President's decision to bomb and mine stood unopposed by both Moscow and Peking. The summit gained him the public support that the Politburo had hoped to undermine with its invasion, and that support virtually assured his re-election over the foundering Democratic Party candidate, George McGovern. The disastrous offensive and the prospect of Nixon's success at the polls caused Northern leaders to reconsider their emphasis on a military takeover. Pham Hung's mid-September directive to Communist cadres, "that an effort would be made to 'force' Nixon to settle the war before election day,"⁶³ indicated that the Politburo had given negotiated settlement first priority.

As Hanoi moved towards negotiations, American and South Vietnamese military pressure increased. Nixon answered Hanoi's concessions during the July and August rounds of talks with added bombing. On 15 September, three Southern divisions

⁶¹Quoted by Don Tate in "Nixon Seeks to Pound Sense into N. Viets," (Columbus, Ohio) Citizen-Journal, 30 December 1972.

⁶²Ulsamer, p. 60. The other division was in Laos.

⁶³Quoted in Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1333.

pushed six Northern divisions out of Quang Tri, and the one-time besiegers of An Loc found themselves hard pressed to avoid annihilation. While Hanoi worked for an accord prior to November, the military situation dictated that it obtain a cessation of hostilities as soon as possible. Asserted Thompson: "For the first time in the Indochina wars the communist side was being compelled to negotiate in order to forestall the possibility of defeat."⁶⁴

Hanoi had four objectives at the bargaining table. Its first goal was to remove the American Air Force and Navy from the war, which would prevent defeat and allow the North Vietnamese Army to rebuild for later operations. Second, Northern leaders aimed at restricting future United States military activity in the South. Third, the Politburo wanted to retain Northern units in the South; in this regard Nixon's 8 May 1972 proposal stressing an in-place cease-fire offered a chance to secure some military gain from the Easter Offensive. Finally, Hanoi desired the removal of Thieu and the establishment of a coalition government in the South. Speaking for the Politburo, Le Duc Tho stated that Thieu was the overriding obstruction to a unified nation and that his government would collapse once the Americans withdrew support.⁶⁵ Although Northern leaders desired these objectives with minimum concessions, a rapid curtailment of American military pressure was paramount. Ideally, they hoped that election stresses would force Nixon to sign an imprecise agreement dealing with general principles and ending American involvement in Vietnam.⁶⁶

During the September and October negotiations, Le Duc Tho displayed a sense of urgency to end the war. He produced a schedule on 26 September for a settlement

⁶⁴Thompson, Peace Is Not at Hand, p. 121.

⁶⁵Message, "Comments of Le Duc Tho," 242137Z May 1972, from Major General Keegan, Chief of Air Force Intelligence, to Generals Clay and Vogt, in PAVE AEGIS and Miscellaneous Messages, SEA, June 1971-June 1972. The message was a reproduction of a report from the US Peace Delegation in Paris to the Secretary of State, and contained Tho's May remarks to French Communist Party members.

⁶⁶Thompson, p. 123; Joseph Alsop, "Hanoi's Strategy Changed," The Washington Post, 24 January 1973.

within one month, yet he continued to demand Thieu's removal before signing an agreement. At the decisive 8 October session, Tho immediately suggested that the United States and North Vietnam sign an accord resolving strictly military issues. Accepting Nixon's proposal for a cease-fire, Tho dropped the requirements for a coalition government and for Thieu's resignation. By 12 October only two substantive issues remained: prisoner release and continued American military assistance to Saigon. Kissinger departed Paris to brief Thieu on 18 October, sending Hanoi a proposal for the disputed points and stating that an additional negotiating session would probably be required. The next day, in Saigon, Kissinger received a message from Hanoi accepting verbatim the text that he had submitted.

Of all the concessions made by Hanoi, surrendering the demand for a political settlement proved the most difficult. By removing their demand for the Thieu government's dismissal, Northern leaders accorded it a measure of legitimacy that ran counter to their aim of unification. When asked by a member of the French Communist Party in May 1972 if the North Vietnamese could deal with Thieu, Le Duc Tho had replied:

Impossible; he is responsible for Vietnamization. Without him, it [the Saigon government] will fall apart immediately. He has become--necessarily--our number one enemy; his departure is imperative. In addition this [struggle at the negotiating table] is a test for us against the Americans. Through our demands, we come to know how much longer Nixon will support him; as soon as he drops him, we will have won. We can, therefore, go slowly ... without letting up.⁶⁷

Communist leaders understood the importance that Nixon placed on the Thieu government's survival. Le Duc Tho's offer to accept a military solution did not sacrifice the North's war aim, but it did sacrifice a major principle of Hanoi's policy. In accepting the in-place cease-fire, Tho managed a degree of face-saving by refusing to acknowledge the presence of "foreign" North Vietnamese soldiers in the South. Yet

⁶⁷Message, "Comments of Le Duc Tho," 242137Z May 1972.

Hanoi's decision to seek a military accord resulted in only negligible bombing decreases on 13 and 16 October.

To obtain a substantial bombing reduction, the Politburo on 19 October accepted Kissinger's proposals resolving the issues of prisoner exchange and materiel support for the South. Kissinger had informed Northern leaders that he would travel to Hanoi to initial an agreement, and his message of the 18th stated: "With the text of the agreement completed. . . [the United States] would stop bombing the North altogether twenty-four hours before my arrival in Hanoi."⁶⁸ The Politburo's latest concessions were additional violations of principle and revealed its desperation to curtail American involvement. Hanoi shunned its Viet Cong ally by accepting the release of all prisoners except Viet Cong cadres in Southern jails. More importantly, the Communists permitted the United States to resupply the South following American withdrawal. In consenting to a strictly military accord the Politburo assured the retention of the Thieu government; by permitting that government to receive military aid, the Communists helped to guarantee its survival. Nixon notified North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong "that the agreement could now be considered complete,"⁶⁹ although he also called for a one-day delay in Tho's 26 September schedule to resolve unilateral declarations concerning Laos and Cambodia. Hanoi accepted the American position on the declarations on 21 October. Two days later, Nixon suspended bombing above the 20th parallel, ending Linebacker I.

Linebacker's effectiveness in wringing concessions from Hanoi stemmed from a number of factors. Both the Chinese and the Soviets placed a priority on detente with the United States, and their emphasis obviated the primary negative objective that had restricted Johnson's application of air power. Nixon's diplomatic initiatives to Peking and Moscow allowed him to increase attacks in August without fear of a reprisal

⁶⁸Kissinger, pp. 1365-66.

⁶⁹Nixon, RN, 2: 195

by the Communist superpowers. The success of the trips to China and the Soviet Union further provided the President with the public support necessary to conduct an extensive air offensive. Hanoi acknowledged the impact of Nixon's diplomacy. On 17 August, the Party newspaper Nhan Dan published a bitter condemnation of the Chinese and Soviet detente with the United States. The editorial described the Communist superpowers' actions as "throwing a life-buoy to a drowning pirate . . . in order to serve one's narrow national interests." "This is a harmful compromise," it concluded, "advantageous to the enemy, and disadvantageous to the Revolution."⁷⁰

Another key to Linebacker's success was the conventional nature of the war in 1972. Rolling Thunder had caused minimal damage to the Southern insurgency because Viet Cong operations required few external resources. In contrast to the guerrilla war waged during Johnson's presidency, the Easter Offensive was a massive conventional attack supported by tanks and heavy artillery. These forces demanded resupply, and mining negated Hanoi's primary source of materiel. With no possibility of provisioning by sea, Hanoi turned to stockpiled goods and overland transportation. Both sources were vulnerable to air power, the latter especially because of technological improvements in ordnance. Linebacker, together with mining, tactical air support in the South, and stiffening Southern resistance, wrecked Hanoi's capacity to conduct offensive warfare. Moreover, the bombing and mining restricted all Northern imports, and the Politburo found its populace in danger of starving.

Without corresponding successes in the South, Linebacker could not have secured gains in the North. Nixon noted in early May 1972: "All the air power in the world and strikes on Hanoi-Haiphong aren't going to save South Vietnam if the South Vietnamese aren't able to hold on the ground."⁷¹ After a shaky initial performance, the Southern Army, backed by large doses of close air support, blunted the Northern

⁷⁰Nhan Dan Editorial, 17 August 1972, in Porter, 2: 568.

⁷¹Nixon, RN, 2: 78.

onslaught. By June Giap's offensive was spent, and the morale of Southern units climbed as they anticipated a counterattack. The 13 September recapture of Quang Tri by three fewer divisions than the Communists had defending the city signaled the Politburo that its army faced ruin.

Kissinger's skill at the bargaining table also heightened Linebacker's impact. His two years of previous negotiations had given him an understanding of Northern perceptions that served him well in 1972. Reiterating that bombing would decrease during the final phase of talks, Kissinger intensified Tho's urgency to conclude an accord. The National Security Advisor had gained the respect of his diplomatic adversaries, and he knew that they would not lightly regard any statement outlining conditions for a cessation of military activity.

While Linebacker was not solely responsible for Hanoi's negotiating reversal, Kissinger could not have gained Communist concessions without it. With overland routes to China left open, mining would have served no purpose and the resupply of the Northern Army would have posed little problem. Giap's conventional offensive made North Vietnam susceptible to the type of air campaign espoused by Air Force strategic bombing doctrine: one aimed at production centers and their means of distribution. Nixon assured Linebacker's consistency, an essential factor if the operation was to hurt Hanoi. He granted Vogt and the Joint Chiefs considerable authority to direct the campaign, and the general used his control to conduct systematic assaults on Northern resources. The North Vietnamese did not feel the full effects of bombing until after depleting their stockpiles. Once supplies dwindled, the campaign had a telling impact.

Although Linebacker contributed to Hanoi's negotiating concessions, it did not achieve the "honorable peace" desired by Nixon. Paradoxically, while the campaign contributed to Hanoi's willingness to agree on Nixon's terms, it also convinced Thieu to oppose an agreement in the belief that he could gain total victory. Viewing

the concessions that Linebacker helped extract from Hanoi, the South Vietnamese President reasoned that continued strikes could win the war. He told Kissinger that an agreement had to define the DMZ as a formal boundary between North and South Vietnam plus remove Northern troops from the South. These proposals, the National Security Advisor later remarked, were a facade. He stated: "We failed early enough to grasp that Thieu's real objection was not to terms but to the fact of any compromise. Conflict between us and Thieu was built into the termination of the war on any terms less than Hanoi's total surrender."⁷²

Thieu perceived that agreeing to Kissinger's October settlement might well lead to Southern defeat. An American withdrawal matched by a cease-fire in-place committed Thieu to a political struggle against the disciplined organization of the Communists, and Thieu was unwilling to risk his demise either politically or militarily. Hanoi grasped the objective of his opposition. Northern leaders understood--as did Thieu--that Nixon's commitment to "honor" prevented him from a unilateral settlement. Having obtained a bombing curtailment permitting receipt of overland supplies, Northern officials had no intention of granting Thieu added stature. On 26 October, Hanoi Radio broadcast the heretofore secret record of the Kissinger-Tho negotiations, including the text of the draft peace agreement. North Vietnam condemned "the Nixon Administration's lack of good will and seriousness" and called for a signing of the accord on 31 October, the date originally scheduled.⁷³

To counter Hanoi's charges, Kissinger conducted a press conference on 26 October that produced his declaration: "We believe peace is at hand." He commented that "what remains to be done [to secure an agreement] can be settled in one more negotiating session with the North Vietnamese negotiators lasting . . . no more than three or four days." Yet he also cautioned that

⁷²Kissinger, p. 1393. Original emphasis.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 1393.

Saigon is . . . entitled to participate in the settlement of a war fought on its territory. . . . We will not be stampeded into an agreement until its provisions are right. We will not be deflected from an agreement when its provisions are right. And with this attitude, and with some cooperation from the other side, we believe that we can restore both peace and unity to America very soon.⁷⁴

Nixon, Kissinger, and most American military chiefs believed that Linebacker helped force Hanoi to make the negotiating concessions that led to a draft agreement. Air Force operational reports reflected this perception. A 1975 study stated that "interdiction operations were a primary factor in the decision of NVN [North Vietnamese] leaders to abandon their hope for an outright military victory and to step up their diplomatic efforts in order to achieve their goals through political means."⁷⁵ Many commanders compared Linebacker to Rolling Thunder, concluding that reduced political controls made Linebacker effective. Army General William C. Westmoreland attributed the campaign's success to its intensity. He commented: "When President Nixon decided to use our available military power in a manner that truly hurt North Vietnam, negotiations began to move in a substantive way."⁷⁶ Perhaps the military's most representative assertion concerning Linebacker's impact came from one of the men responsible for its implementation. Speaking in 1978, General Vogt acknowledged that "after Linebacker I, the enemy was suing for peace. They were hurt real bad. Most of the major targets had been obliterated in the North . . . and they were ready to conclude an agreement." He also thought that Nixon had halted Linebacker prematurely:

Kissinger and Le Duc Tho got together and then indications were that the agreement was imminent. Kissinger then informed me that he was going to order the bombing stopped in the Hanoi area as a gesture of good will to speed up the signing of the agreement. This was . . . in October 1972. I protested and said, "You know our history with

⁷⁴Henry Kissinger, "Vietnam Negotiations: News Conference 26 October 1972," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 8 (30 October 1973), pp. 1565-66, 1568.

⁷⁵Corona Harvest: The USAF in Southeast Asia, 1970-1973, p. 63.

⁷⁶William C. Westmoreland in Lessons of Vietnam, p. 61.

Communists is of having to keep the heat on them in order to get them to do anything. If you take the heat off them, they may never sign."⁷⁷

Despite not producing a settlement, Linebacker increased South Vietnam's chances for survival. The campaign helped wreck the North's military capability, assuring that Hanoi could not soon launch another offensive. Linebacker also helped wring the concessions from Hanoi that Nixon considered essential to an "honorable peace." Still, the bombing did not end the war. The President would gear the next round of Linebacker towards compelling both his ally and his enemy to accomplish that goal.

⁷⁷Voyt interview, 3-9 August 1978, pp. 87-88.

CHAPTER VI

LINEBACKER II

I think, sir, any time you conduct a military operation like this the objective is quite clear in military terms. Of course, you can go on to say that war is an instrument of policy and what we are all trying to do is to bring this war to a close so we can release the prisoners and cease U. S. participation.

Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, 9 January 1973¹

On the eve of the 1972 election, President Richard M. Nixon faced a dilemma over Vietnam. Nixon had severed Hanoi from its allies and crushed its bid for military victory, resulting in its acceptance of his 8 May peace proposal. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu then withdrew support for the terms that he earlier endorsed. Thieu's modifications to the agreement were unacceptable to the North Vietnamese, who demanded that Nixon sign the accord negotiated in October by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. Thus, Nixon found both Hanoi and Saigon blocking his goal of an "honorable" disengagement.

To achieve that aim, Nixon once more relied on the combination of diplomatic and military pressure. After another round of negotiations failed to produce a settlement, the President again applied air power against the North. Yet the December 1972 "Linebacker" campaign differed from its namesake in how it was to attain "peace with honor." Nixon had intended Linebacker I to accomplish his objective by wrecking North Vietnam's war-making capacity; he intended Linebacker

¹US House, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on DOD, DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, Hearings, 93rd Cong., 1st sess., 9-18 January 1973, p. 44.

II to destroy the North's will to fight while demonstrating to Thieu that America would remain committed to Southern independence.

WAR AIMS

Nixon's goals in Vietnam in November 1972 differed in two key respects from those articulated prior to Hanoi's Easter Offensive. Although he still sought an American withdrawal that did not abandon South Vietnam to a Communist takeover, he also aimed to convince Thieu that the United States' commitment to Southern independence would continue after the departure of American troops. These objectives formed Nixon's positive political goals. A significant feature of the President's negative objectives also changed following his re-election. Nixon was certain that Congress would stop the war when it met in January. As that deadline neared, he became more willing to risk the loss of public support through increased military pressure in Vietnam. While realizing that the December bombings would likely trigger an outcry, he believed that he could do little to dissuade Congress from ending Vietnam funding. By far, the January 1973 time limit was the President's greatest restraint on applying military force after his re-election.

Nixon's commitment to "honor" prevented him from ignoring Thieu's proposed changes to the October draft accord. Kissinger believed that a settlement had to incorporate at least some of Thieu's demands. "If we could not bring about a single change requested by Saigon," the National Security Advisor recalled, "it would be tantamount to wrecking the South Vietnamese government."² Still, both Nixon and Kissinger wanted an agreement falling within the October accord's basic framework. The President dismissed the plea for a Northern troop withdrawal, noting that Thieu had accepted an in-place cease-fire since October 1971. "We could not agree with our

²Henry A. Kissinger, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 142.

allies in South Vietnam when they added conditions to the established positions after an agreement had been reached that reflected these established positions," Kissinger asserted.³ Nor would the United States continue the war to gain a Southern victory. Nixon included a minimum number of Thieu's proposals in a bargaining position that he felt gave Saigon the means to prevail against the Communists inside Southern borders.

To guarantee that the South survived a future military onslaught, the President pledged to defend the Thieu government. General Alexander Haig, Kissinger's military assistant, conveyed Nixon's assurances to Thieu on 9 November. Haig emphasized that Nixon considered the October agreement excellent but would attempt to incorporate some of Thieu's changes into a final accord. When Thieu condemned the President for disregarding many additions, Nixon answered that attaining all of the modifications was "unrealistic." He added: "But far more important than what we say in the agreement . . . is what we do in the event the enemy renews its aggression. You have my absolute assurance that if Hanoi fails to abide by the terms of this agreement it is my intention to take swift and severe retaliatory action."⁴ Nixon believed that the Southern leader would ultimately agree to a settlement, yet he worried about the timing of Thieu's acquiescence. Haig informed Thieu of the danger in stalling, and Nixon told both Haig and Kissinger that 8 December was the final date for an accord that would allow its completion prior to Congress' return. "If Thieu could not be convinced to come along by then," the President later remarked, "I could be reluctantly prepared to reach a separate agreement."⁵

³Henry Kissinger, "Vietnam Peace Negotiations: News Conference 16 December 1972," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 8 (18 December 1972), p. 1765.

⁴Richard Nixon, RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon, 2 vols. (New York: Warner Books, 1978), Vol. 2: pp. 222-23; Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1411-12.

⁵Nixon, RN, 2: 223-24.

RATIONALE FOR AN AIR CAMPAIGN, NOVEMBER--DECEMBER, 1972

Nixon's urgency for a November settlement matched that displayed by Le Duc Tho the preceding month. The President increased military pressure to induce Hanoi's return to the bargaining table. B-52s began attacking north of the DMZ on 2 November, and two days later the North Vietnamese agreed to a mid-November meeting. Believing that Linebacker had contributed to Hanoi's October concessions, Nixon thought that additional bombing would provide similar results should the North again prove intransigent. He advised Kissinger on 24 November to suspend talks for a week if no progress occurred, during which time he would authorize a massive air attack on North Vietnam.⁶

Negotiations resumed on 20 November. Kissinger noted that his adversary was not the Le Duc Tho of late summer who relentlessly pushed towards a settlement. The National Security Advisor contributed to Tho's foot-dragging by submitting all 69 of Thieu's suggested changes for consideration.⁷ Tho responded to this gesture with his own modifications, one of which linked the release of American prisoners to Saigon's release of jailed Viet Cong. On the 22nd, Kissinger dropped many of Thieu's demands. Tho in turn granted concessions, although the prisoner release proposal remained. The next day he offered to remove "some" troops from the northern areas of South Vietnam in exchange for a release of Viet Cong political prisoners.

With the Presidential election over, Kissinger thought that the North lacked the incentive to negotiate seriously. Nixon differed, contending an absence of military pressure prevented a settlement. Both agreed that Hanoi delayed an accord in hopes that Congress would terminate American involvement. Kissinger believed this threat

⁶Ibid., 2: 228.

⁷"I put them [the 69 changes] forward," Kissinger stated, "in order to avoid the charge that we were less than meticulous in guaranteeing Saigon's concerns--and to ease the task of obtaining Thieu's approval. As often happens when one acts for the record, we achieved neither objective." See White House Years, p. 1417. Thieu had ordered his ambassadors in London, Washington, and Paris to attend the November sessions.

significant as he observed Tho's attempts to widen the split between Washington and Saigon. On the 25th, the National Security Advisor asked for a recess until 4 December, and Le Duc Tho approved the request.⁸

Nixon cabled Hanoi on 27 November that the United States would return to the talks for a final session. At Kissinger's suggestion, the President uncharacteristically reduced bombing 25 percent to demonstrate his desire to settle. He did not, however, have faith that the negotiations would bear fruit. Kissinger outlined two options if the talks stalemated: first, Nixon could resume bombing north of the 20th parallel; second, he could accept the minimal concessions made by Tho in November and demand their incorporation into the October agreement. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger felt that Saigon would approve the second option. The National Security Advisor thought that additional talks were necessary, while the President leaned towards the "massive bombing" alternative. Yet Nixon believed, as he had in April, that increased military pressure could only follow a breakdown in negotiations stemming conspicuously from Hanoi. "It was my firm conviction," he later declared, "that we must not be responsible--or be portrayed as being responsible--for the breakdown of the talks." The President met with the Joint Chiefs on 30 November to discuss an appropriate military response should the negotiations fail. The chiefs had completed two plans, one for a three and the other for a six-day series of strikes involving B-52s against the Northern heartland.⁹

Departing for Paris on 3 December, Kissinger hoped to settle the remaining issues in two days. Le Duc Tho soon dissuaded him from the thought. On the 4th, Tho withdrew nine of his 12 concessions from November while maintaining all his demands

⁸Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1417-23.

⁹Nixon, RN, 2: 226-35; Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1420; DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, p. 36. Nixon remarks that he favored continued negotiations while Kissinger urged bombing. Kissinger denies Nixon's contention in White House Years and claims just the opposite. Given the President's pronouncements and conduct earlier in the year, Kissinger makes the stronger case.

for changes. The only option he presented Kissinger was acceptance of the original October accord. Two days later Hanoi's position remained unchanged. Nixon informed Kissinger that if the next meeting did not produce a breakthrough, he would begin heavy bombing. The National Security Advisor arrived at the 7 December session prepared to offer a "rock-bottom position," but Tho prevented the move by advancing concessions. The Northern delegate agreed to six of the nine changes that he had denounced on the 4th and dropped the demand for a Viet Cong prisoner release. Concurrently, he objected to the previously-accepted stipulation respecting the DMZ as a provisional boundary between North and South Vietnam. "This was precisely where Le Duc Tho wanted us," Kissinger recalled, "tantalizingly close enough to an agreement to keep us going and prevent us from using military force, but far enough away to maintain the pressure that might yet at the last moment achieve Hanoi's objectives of disintegrating the political structure in Saigon."¹⁰

With the danger of Congressional action less than a month away, Kissinger offered concessions to obtain an immediate agreement. By 9 December only the DMZ issue remained, and Kissinger planned to concede it. The settlement would include some of Thieu's demands. Still, the National Security Advisor reasoned, "we can anticipate no lasting peace in the wake of a consummated agreement. . . . We will probably have little chance of maintaining the agreement without evident hair-trigger readiness . . . to enforce its provisions."¹¹ Nixon concurred that the time was ripe for an accord. "It would be painful if Thieu refused to go along," the President reflected, "but there was no question that we had done everything possible to help him and that now we had to look to our own interests and conclude an agreement if the terms were acceptable."¹²

¹⁰Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1428-35; Nixon, RN, 2: 237.

¹¹Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1435.

¹²Nixon, RN, 2: 238.

Le Duc Tho refused to accede to Kissinger's design. On 11 December, the Communist delegate rejected the agreed-upon signing procedures and demanded withdrawal of American civilian technicians from the South. Kissinger concluded that Tho stalled to deter either a suspension of negotiations or an agreement. Announcing on 12 December that he would depart for Hanoi in two days to confer with the Politburo, Tho offered to return to Paris, although he stated that messages could resolve the remaining issues. Kissinger agreed, cabling Nixon that the North Vietnamese "have reduced the issues to a point where a settlement can be reached with one exchange of telegrams." "However," he added, "I do not think that they will send this telegram . . . in the absence of strong pressures."¹³

The National Security Advisor termed the 13 December session as "the day that finally exploded the negotiation."¹⁴ When American linguistic experts met with Hanoi's, they found that the North Vietnamese had inserted 17 changes into the completed portion of the agreement's text. Tho proved inflexible regarding the additions. Reluctantly, Kissinger decided that future talks were pointless. After the meeting he advised Nixon

to turn hard on Hanoi and increase pressure enormously through bombing and other means. . . . This would make clear that they [the North Vietnamese] paid something for these past ten days. Concurrently . . . pressures on Saigon would be essential so that Thieu does not think he has faced us down, and we can demonstrate that we will not put up with our ally's intransigence any more than we will do so with our enemy.¹⁵

Nixon too believed that the time had come to apply military force. "We had now reached the point," he remembered, "where only the strongest action would have any effect in convincing Hanoi that negotiating a fair settlement with us was a better

¹³Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1442. Throughout their telegrams of November and December, Nixon and Kissinger used the terms "strong pressure" and "strong action" to denote bombing.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 1443.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 1443.

option for them than continuing the war." He decided to use air power, but the question of how much to employ remained. When the President met with Kissinger and Haig on the 14th, the National Security Advisor suggested a return to October's Linebacker operations while the general argued for large-scale B-52 strikes north of the 20th parallel. Nixon supported Haig, commenting that anything less than bomber raids "will only make the enemy contemptuous."¹⁶

Unlike Linebacker I, the President aimed the December bombing directly at Northern will. The President desired a maximum psychological impact on the North Vietnamese to demonstrate that he would not stand for an indefinite delay in the negotiations. His objective fit the pattern of America's previous strategic bombing campaigns. Linebacker I, like the initial air offensives against Germany, Japan, and North Korea--as well as the first year and a half of Rolling Thunder--had attempted to destroy enemy morale by wrecking the capability to fight. After finding that bombing aimed specifically at an enemy's war-making capacity would not accomplish American objectives, air commanders had focused their attacks on both the capability and willingness to resist. They would do likewise in Linebacker II.¹⁷

The B-52, with its massive conventional bomb load and all-weather capability, was air power's best tool to disrupt an enemy psychologically. Attacking at altitudes over 30,000 feet, the bomber could neither be seen nor heard by those on the ground. Moreover, B-52 raids against the North's well-defended heartland would jeopardize aircraft essential to the nation's nuclear capability and thus display American resolve. Nixon hoped that Thieu, as well as the North Vietnamese, would note this determination. Since an agreement would rest on America's air power deterrent,

¹⁶Nixon, *RH*, 2: 241-42; Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1447-48.

¹⁷General John C. Meyer, "Speech at Andersen AFB, Guam, 3 January 1973," in *Personal Papers of J. C. Meyer*, Air Force Historical Research Center (hereafter referred to as AFHRC), Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, file number X168.7169, frame 130, reel 23167; Henry Kissinger, "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam: News Conference, 24 January 1973," *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 9 (29 January 1973), p. 73.

Nixon counted on the bombing to demonstrate continued support for Saigon. On the afternoon of the 14th, he ordered a three-day series of raids against Hanoi beginning on 18 December.¹⁸

The President refused to announce the escalation. Kissinger thought that Nixon should make a television address similar to the one in May, declaring why bombing was necessary and outlining requirements for its cessation. The President believed that such a proclamation would delay talks by appearing as an ultimatum and making their resumption a matter of prestige. Instead, he directed Kissinger to conduct a press conference on 16 December explaining that the stalemated discussions stemmed from Communist intransigence. At the conference, the National Security Advisor hinted that the United States might resort to sterner measures to spur the talks. "I expect that we [Kissinger and Le Duc Tho] will meet again," he commented, "but we will have to meet in an atmosphere that is worthy of the seriousness of our endeavor." Nixon cued the North's public negotiators in Paris with equal subtlety. In a message sent less than 12 hours prior to the first B-52's arrival over Hanoi, he asserted that the North Vietnamese "were deliberately and frivolously delaying the talks." The President proposed a return to the agreement's November text with the addition of one or two subsequently negotiated changes. "On this basis," he contended, "we would be prepared to meet again any time after December 26 to conclude an agreement."¹⁹

While refusing to give Hanoi an ultimatum, Nixon presented one to Thieu. The President dispatched Haig to Saigon on 18 December, handing the general a personal letter for the Southern leader. Nixon stated his intention to settle if Hanoi accepted his latest proposal, warning that an increase in military pressure did not indicate a willingness to continue the war. He concluded:

¹⁸James R. McCarthy and George B. Allison, Linebacker II: A View from the Rock (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air War College, 1979), p. 39.

¹⁹Nixon, RN, 2: 237-38, 243; Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1448-49; Kissinger, "Vietnam Negotiations: News Conference, 16 December 1972," p. 1768.

General Haig's mission now represents my final effort to point out to you the necessity for joint action and convey my irrevocable intention to proceed, preferably with your cooperation, but, if necessary, alone. . . . I have asked General Haig to obtain your answer to this absolutely final offer on my part for us to work together in seeking a settlement along the lines I have approved or to go our separate ways.²⁰

CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

Having decided on escalation, Nixon turned to his military chiefs to assure that they applied a large-scale effort to the air campaign dubbed "Linebacker II." He told Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs: "This is your chance to use military power effectively to win this war and if you don't I'll consider you personally responsible." The operation's contingency plan called for three days of all-weather, around-the-clock attacks on essentially the same targets raided during Linebacker I. The President's emphasis on bombers led air commanders to modify the plan significantly to include heavy B-52 participation. Strategic Air Command (SAC) Headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, rewrote the operations order and forwarded it to the Joint Chiefs for approval. On 14 December, Moorer notified SAC's commander, General John C. Meyer, of Nixon's decision to implement Linebacker II. Meyer in turn advised the 8th Air Force Commander, Lieutenant General Gerald W. Johnson, whose B-52s at Andersen and U-Tapao comprised the brunt of the strike force. Johnson received this word on the 15th because of the time differential between Nebraska and Guam.²¹

The final Linebacker II plan stressed a maximum effort in minimum time against "the most lucrative and valuable targets in North Vietnam." While many of the targets matched ones raided in Linebacker I, Linebacker II was no interdiction

²⁰Nixon, RN, 2: 245.

²¹Ibid., 2: 242; DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, pp. 4, 45; McCarthy and Allison, p. 39; USAF Oral History Interview of Lieutenant General Gerald W. Johnson by Mr. Charles K. Hopkins, 3 April 1973, Andersen AFB, Guam, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-831, p. 1.

campaign. In seeking to avoid civilian casualties, air chiefs complied with Nixon's desires and designed Linebacker II to inflict the utmost civilian distress. "I want the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs," Moorer told Meyer, "but minimize damage to the civilian populace." B-52s would attack rail yards, storage areas, power plants, communication centers, and airfields located on Hanoi's periphery. Meanwhile, 7th Air Force and Navy fighters would strike oil, lives in populated areas with smart bombs. Most targets were within ten nautical miles of Hanoi, forcing its inhabitants to respond to each attack, and B-52s would strike throughout the night to prevent its populace from sleeping. These night raids would also reduce the MiG threat, although air chiefs did not devise Linebacker II to achieve air superiority. The time constraints attached to the campaign dictated an immediate assault, and continual pressure was necessary to secure favorable results. SAC planners estimated that they would lose three percent of attacking B-52s to enemy defenses. Nixon agreed that the bomber force would not emerge unscathed, confiding in his diary, "We simply have to take losses if we are going to accomplish our objectives."²²

As the Linebacker II operational order began to arrive at Andersen, General Johnson grew increasingly annoyed. In August 1972, SAC Headquarters had directed 8th Air Force to prepare a plan for striking major targets in North Vietnam with B-52s. Johnson's staff had complied and submitted their proposal to SAC. The Linebacker II order bore little resemblance to the plan developed at Andersen. "As far as we were concerned," one member of the 8th Air Force staff recalled, "it was a new plan." Johnson was irate about the lack of versatility in routing his bombers to target. "General Johnson just blew his cork when they [SAC] wouldn't change the axes of attack," an officer in the headquarters remembered. The general's staff estimated that

²²Headquarters PACAF, Linebacker II USAF Bombing Survey (April 1973), AFHRC file number X717.64-8, pp. 1, 33; Letter from Brigadier General Harry Cordes to Brigadier General James E. McCarthy, n. d., AFHRC, file number K416.04-13, vol. 12, pp. 3, 9 (Cordes was Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence at SAC Headquarters during Linebacker II); POD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, p. 18; Nixon, RN, 2: 244.

the repetitive routing would result in losses considerably higher than SAC's three percent prediction. One staff officer recollected: "When I saw the map [showing the flight path to target], I realized two things: that the weight of effort would be very large, and that it was not going to be a turkey shoot--unless you were on the ground up there."²³

Despite SAC's planning, much work remained for the 34th Air Force staff. SAC determined targets and weight of effort, subject to approval by the Joint Chiefs, as well as axes of attack and flight routes in the high threat area north of the 20th parallel. For Andersen-based aircraft, SAC's preparation covered only two to three hours of the 14-hour mission. Eighth Air Force planned the remainder, consulting with the KC-135 tanker wing at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, to arrange in-flight refueling and with 7th Air Force for fighter support packages similar to those in Linebacker I. Finally, Johnson's staff combined their planning with SAC's into a single directive that enabled aircrews to fly the mission.²⁴

On Monday afternoon, 18 December, the crews of 129 B-52s learned that they would attack Hanoi. Most greeted the news with disbelief followed by some amount of apprehension. U-Tapao's Captain E. A. Petersen remarked, "It was just kind of amazing that we were actually going to do it . . . I almost thought it was a joke at first."²⁵ Major Robert D. Clark, who would soon lead the third wave from Andersen, recalled that "everybody got cranked up. I was ready to do it; my nav [navigator] was just absolutely

²³McCarthy and Allison, p. 26; Interview of Major George Thompson (Ret) by the author, Omaha, Nebraska, 27 October 1982; Interview of Colonel Clyde E. Bodenheimer by the author, 7 January 1983, Maxwell AFB, Alabama; Johnson interview, 3 April 1973, pp. 6-7. Johnson noted: "By the time this [word of Linebacker] got to me the decision to go had already been made. The part I played was in terms of recommendations concerning the size of the force, the size of individual raids or missions, the tactics to be employed, the utilization of the aircraft, the altitudes to be flown, the defensive techniques and this sort of thing." (Emphasis added.)

²⁴Letter, Cordes to McCarthy, p. 4; McCarthy and Allison, p. 41.

²⁵Headquarters 307th Strategic Wing, History of 307th Strategic Wing, October-December 1972, Vol. I (12 July 1973), AFHRC, file number K-WG-307-HI, p. 53.

terrified; my gunner was a hawk. My EW [electric warfare officer] was horribly curious about whether his equipment was going to work --he was excited but scared."²⁶ Permission briefers gave scant attention to targets. Captain John R. Allen, who would fly three Linebacker II missions, noted that the absence of target information mattered little:

There wasn't a whole lot of time devoted during the briefing to the intelligence aspect as to what your target was. All you knew was that you were going "Downtown," and that you might not be coming home. If they had told you that the world was made of green cheese, you wouldn't even have heard it--all you were thinking about was were you going to make it back or were you not. . . , and what about the guy sitting next to you. They [the briefers] didn't belabor the point of what the targets were because it didn't make any difference--you were committed and you were going.²⁷

At 1945 hours on the 18th, 48 B-52s comprising the first of three waves struck the Kien No storage complex, the Yen Vien Rail Yard, and three airfields on the outskirts of Hanoi. Thirty-nine support aircraft accompanied the bombers. The B-52s flew near the northern border of North Vietnam from west to east, turning southeast to make their bomb runs. Attacking in a trail formation of three-ship "cells," they dropped bombs with up to ten minutes separation between formations. Because accuracy and assured destruction were primary considerations, pilots stabilized flight for approximately four minutes prior to bomb release. The B-52s turned west after the bomb run to escape surface-to-air missile (SAM) coverage and head for base. Striking at midnight and 0300, waves two and three conformed to the first wave's flight pattern. Although 94 percent of the bombers hit their targets, Northern defenders also claimed a measure of success. SAMs downed three B-52s and severely damaged two others.²⁸

Linebacker's second and third days paralleled its first both in weight of effort and route of flight. While concerned by the losses on the 18th, General Meyer

²⁶Interview of Colonel Robert D. Clark by the author, Robins AFB, Georgia, 6 January 1983.

²⁷Interview of Major John R. Allen by the author, Osan AB, Korea, 22 September 1981.

²⁸McCarthy and Allison, pp. 31, 42-43, 47, 65; Linebacker II USAF Bombing Survey, p. 25.

considered the toll acceptable. Moreover, the need to complete SAC mission planning 42 hours prior to initial take-off precluded routing changes for day two. On the night of the 19th, 93 B-52s attacked the Thai Nguyen Thermal Power Plant and Yen Vien Rail Yard in three separate waves. SAMs damaged two bombers, but the defenses scored no kills. To SAC planners, the results of the 19th's mission vindicated their routing. This belief, combined with the required lead time between planning and execution, convinced Meyer to use the same attack plan for the 20th. Ninety-nine B-52s in three waves struck the Yen Vien Rail Yard, Thai Nguyen Thermal Power Plant, and the Kinh No and Hanoi oil storage areas. Against this force the North Vietnamese achieved their greatest triumph of the campaign, destroying six B-52s and damaging a seventh.²⁹

The losses infuriated Nixon, who "raised holy hell about the fact that they [B-52s] kept going over the same targets at the same times." He had extended Linebacker II indefinitely on 19 December, but this action guaranteed continued raids by only B-52s and F-111s. Poor weather prevented the bulk of 7th Air force's daylight sorties and transformed the campaign into an almost exclusive bomber effort. A heavy loss of B-52s--America's mightiest warplanes--would create the antithesis of the psychological impact that Nixon desired. Hanoi's delegate to the public talks in Paris, Nguyen Minh Vy, terminated the 21 December session "as a protest to the war escalation and the about-face of the United States in negotiations." Despite realizing the propaganda intent of such utterances, Nixon reasoned that Hanoi would not bargain

²⁹McCarthy and Allison, pp. 41-44, 77, 89, 96.

seriously until the bombers accomplished a high level of destruction at minimum cost.³⁰

Agreeing that the 20th's six percent losses were unacceptable, Meyer revamped Linebacker. He reduced the B-52 sortie rate to 30 aircraft per day, a total that U-Tapao alone could handle. Logistical considerations favored conducting strikes from only one base, and U-Tapao's four-hour missions eliminated the need for air refueling. To protect his bombers, Meyer targeted SAM storage facilities; intelligence showed that Northern gunners possessed no spare missiles at their firing sites. He also prohibited attacks in the immediate vicinity of Hanoi after the raid on the 21st produced the loss of two B-52s. The bombers flew against Haiphong on the 22nd and struck rail yards, storage facilities, and SAM sites in northeastern North Vietnam the next two days. Routing on these missions varied considerably. Escorted by Navy fighters, B-52s traveled over the Tonkin Gulf on the 22nd, feinting an attack on Hanoi before turning north to strike Haiphong. On the 23rd, the bombers again approached over water but flew through the Chinese buffer zone to reach their targets. B-52s on the 24th traveled overland from west to east before turning south for their bomb run. No B-52s were lost

³⁰Nixon, *RN*, 2: 246; McCarthy and Allison, p. 81; "North Vietnam's Statements on the Paris Talks, December 17 and 21, 1972," in Michael F. Herz, *The Prestige Press and the Christmas Bombing, 1972* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980), p. 85. In January 1973 Congressman Daniel P. Flood voiced the perception that Nixon feared: "I was sitting right here when we first started talking about B-52's. That was a concept. Boy that was going to be it. If we ever got B-52's, that would do it. There would be no problems from then on, and here this little backward, these 'gooks' developed, [sic] and they are knocking down your B-52's like clay pigeons, with all the sophisticated hardware which was beyond our own ken, being run by 'gooks.' This is some kind of lesson." See *DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam*, pp. 30-31.

from the 22nd to the 24th, and only one bomber received damage. Following the mission on the 24th, Nixon directed a 36-hour bombing pause for Christmas.³¹

Although hoping that the North Vietnamese would respond to the respite with an offer to negotiate, the President had no intention of halting attacks before receiving such a commitment. He cabled Hanoi on 22 December and requested a meeting for 3 January. If Northern leaders agreed, Nixon declared that he would stop bombing north of the 20th parallel on 31 December for the talks' duration. Hanoi did not respond, and the President ordered a massive raid against both Hanoi and Haiphong for the 26th.

The 26 December assault was Linebacker II's most ambitious, with both Andersen and U-Tapao contributing large numbers of aircraft. Instead of attacking throughout the night as had bombers on the first three days, 120 B-52s struck ten different targets in 15 minutes. Four waves totalling 72 aircraft simultaneously attacked Hanoi from four different directions. Concurrently, two waves of 15 bombers each struck Haiphong from the east and south, and 18 B-52s raided the Thai Nguyen Rail yard north of Hanoi. A multitude of SAMs streaked through the dark sky, revealing that Hanoi's defenders had used the five-day intermission to bolster their armaments. One crewmember counted 26 missiles launched at his aircraft before losing track because of the rapidity of fire. Nevertheless, SAMs claimed only two bombers, a loss rate of 1.66 percent.³²

³¹ McCarthy and Allison, pp. 91, 97-98, 100, 108, 115. General Meyer asked for 7th Air Force Commander General John Vogt's assistance in destroying SAMs. Meyer had discovered that the primary SAM assembly plant was in the center of Hanoi, but the possibility of civilian casualties prevented B-52s from striking the target. With the approval of Admiral Moorer, Vogt dispatched a flight of 16 F-4s that bombed the plant through a solid overcast from 20,000 feet using LORAN. The mission was successful. See USAF Oral History Interview of General John W. Vogt by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur W. McCants, Jr. and Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 8-9 August 1978, AFHRC, file number K239.0512-1093, p. 92. Andersen contributed 12 B-52s to the raid on 23 December.

³² McCarthy and Allison, pp. 121-39.

On the morning of the 27th, Hanoi notified Nixon that talks could resume in Paris on 8 January.³³ The North Vietnamese contended that Le Duc Tho's ill health prevented earlier discussions. The Communists confirmed their "constantly serious negotiating attitude" and "willingness to settle the remaining questions with the U.S. side." To Nixon, the message signaled that Hanoi had had enough. Prior to his retort, Hanoi forwarded another message expressing a desire to resume technical talks after the cessation of bombing and emphasizing that Le Duc Tho would meet Kissinger on 8 January. The President responded on the 27th that discussions between Kissinger and Tho's experts must begin on 2 January. Formal negotiations would start on the 8th, with a time limit attached, and the North Vietnamese would not deliberate on matters covered by the basic agreement. Acceptance of these procedures would result in an end to bombing north of the 20th parallel within 36 hours.³⁴

Despite the North's apparent willingness to negotiate, Nixon did not curtail Linebacker. Sixty B-52s, 30 each from U-Tapao and Andersen, raided targets surrounding Hanoi, plus the Lang Dang Rail Yard near the Chinese border, on 27 December. Except for Haiphong's deletion, the attack was a small-scale version of the previous night's assault. Haiphong's absence from the strike list disclosed a new problem for Air Force planners--a lack of suitable targets. B-52s had achieved sufficient destruction of Haiphong's oil storage center, power transformer, and rail yards to preclude the port city from further attacks. Located on the northeast rail line to China, the Lang Dang complex was an interdiction target raided during Linebacker I. The North Vietnamese fired more SAMs on the 27th than the night before, although aircrews deemed the gunners less accurate. Still, SAMs downed two bombers, the campaign's final losses.³⁵

³³Nixon received this message on the afternoon of the 26th because of the 13-hour time differential.

³⁴Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1457-58; Nixon, *RJL* 2: 250.

³⁵McCarthy and Allison, pp. 145-53.

Sixty bombers flew on both 28 and 29 December, concentrating on SAM storage sites around Hanoi and on the Lang Dang Rail Yard. Varied approaches to the targets continued. Major Clark, who flew three Linebacker missions, felt that by the 29th B-52 tactics were solid.³⁶ The bombers encountered feeble resistance on the 28th and 29th from enemy defenses. "By the tenth day," Captain Allen remembered, "there were no missiles, there were no MiGs, there was no AAA [antiaircraft artillery]--there was no threat. It was easy pickings."³⁷ As many crews expectantly prepared for a knockout blow, General Johnson received notification that the 29 December mission was Linebacker's last.

Hanoi's answer to Nixon's proposal arrived in Washington on 28 December. Northern leaders accepted the President's provisions, stressing their desire to negotiate seriously. Nixon halted all bombing north of the 20th parallel at 1900 hours Washington time on the 29th. The following day he announced the resumption of talks. He also informed Hanoi that the United States approached the coming negotiations "with great seriousness":

The U. S. side wants to again affirm that it will make one final major effort to see whether a settlement within the October framework can be worked out. The U.S. side wants to point out that Dr. Kissinger will not be able to spend more than four days in Paris on this occasion. . . . The decision must be made now whether it is possible to move from a period of hostility to one of normalization.³⁸

CONTROLS ON LINEBACKER II

Nixon's reliance on B-52s to produce a rapid settlement contributed to Linebacker II's unique political, military, and operational restrictions. "I fear that . . . in the past . . . our political objectives have not been achieved because of too much caution on the military side," the President wrote early in the campaign. He told

³⁶Clark interview, 6 January 1983.

³⁷Allen interview, 22 September 1981.

³⁸Quoted in Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1459.

Moorer: "I don't want any more of this crap about the fact we couldn't hit this target or that one." To attain higher levels of destruction, Nixon permitted B-52s to attack certain storage facilities raided by fighters during Linebacker I. While most bomber targets lay on Hanoi's outskirts, the President sanctioned strikes against the Bac Mai communication center and storage area in the capital's heart. B-52s also raided Hanoi's commercial airfield, which served as a MiG-21 base. The Lang Dang Rail Yard, a target on four missions, was inside the Chinese buffer zone. Although he controlled the campaign's pace, Nixon offered only general guidance regarding targets. The Joint Chiefs, in contrast, sometimes provided Meyer with specific objectives. Meyer submitted all targets to the chiefs for validation, yet the SAC commander retained a free hand in selecting tactics. Asserted Moorer shortly after Linebacker II's conclusion: "The commander of the Strategic Air Command and his staff . . . were not told how to do the job; they were told what to do."³⁹

General Meyer's tactical deployment resulted from the continued concern for civilian casualties. Nixon felt that indiscriminate raids might disrupt detente and persuade the Soviets and Chinese to increase support to the North. As no B-52 had flown over Hanoi prior to 18 December, Meyer demanded routes and formations for the first days that minimized the chances of collateral damage. Major George Thompson, Director of Targets for 8th Air Force Intelligence, later observed that "we were not allowed to bomb many targets much more lucrative because of [possible] civilian casualties." Using smart bombs during a rare period of good weather, 7th Air Force F-4s attacked Thompson's choice for the North's most important target, the Hanoi Rail Yard. F-4s also destroyed Hanoi's SAM assembly plant. The Joint Chiefs prohibited Meyer from striking the complex, claiming that B-52s would kill 24,000 civilians from the misses. Eighth Air Force briefers instructed radar navigators to bring their bombs

³⁹Nixon, RN, 2: 242, 244; Herz, p. 28; Letter, Cordes to McCarthy, p. 3; Linebacker II USAF Bombing Survey, pp. 8, 33; DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, pp. 9, 38.

back unless they were 100 percent sure of their aiming point. All B-52 target maps contained the locations of schools, hospitals, and POW camps, and briefers cautioned crews when bomb runs neared such facilities.⁴⁰

Despite efforts to restrict casualties, Nixon realized that his use of B-52s signaled an escalation in the war that would not go unnoticed by the public. He underestimated, however, the intensity of the reaction to the raids. Kissinger's declaration of "peace is at hand," followed by the resumption of talks, led many Americans to speculate that the war would end by Christmas. Instead, as the holiday season neared, Kissinger announced little progress in Paris, and Nixon, without explanation, unleashed the war's greatest aerial assault. "How did we get in a few short weeks from a prospect for peace that 'you can bank on,'" asked a 28 December Washington Post editorial, "to the most savage and senseless act of war ever visited, over a scant ten days, by one sovereign people upon another?" The New York Times' Tom Wicker labeled the raids "Shame on Earth." Much of the world press concurred with these viewpoints. The (London) Times noted that Nixon's action was "not the conduct of a man who wants peace very badly," while Hamburg's Die Zeit concluded that "even allies must call this a crime against human..."⁴¹

The surge of domestic criticism dismayed both military and civil leadership. "I cannot understand why it is that people in this country are so quick to accuse their own country of taking these kinds of actions [obliteration bombing] when they simply are not true," Admiral Moorer proclaimed in January 1973. Nixon perceived the uproar as the media's first opportunity to strike out against his re-election. Yet both refused to

⁴⁰Howard Silber, "SAC Chief: B-52s Devastated Viet Air Defenses," Omaha World Herald, 25 February 1973; McCarthy and Allison, pp. 46-47, 50; Thompson interview, 27 October 1982; Vogt interview, 8-9 August 1978, pp. 90-91; Interview by newsmen with Admiral Moorer, 4 April 1973; Allen interview, 22 September 1981; Cassette Tape from Major John R. Allen to the author, June 1982.

⁴¹"Terror Bombing in the Name of Peace," The Washington Post, 28 December 1972; Tom Wicker, "Shame on Earth," The New York Times, 26 December 1972. "Outrage and Relief," Time, 8 January 1973, p. 14.

answer the charges leveled at them during Linebacker. Announcing that most B-52 targets lay on Hanoi's periphery would, Moorer feared, allow the Communists to mass SAMs for maximum effect. The President believed that any hint of the attacks' purpose would appear as an ultimatum, and that the North Vietnamese would delay their response to save face.⁴² Nevertheless, he could not ignore the public outcry. The clamor reinforced his belief that the campaign was his last chance to end the war "honorably."

Congress sustained Nixon's conviction by echoing the public uproar. Senator Edward Kennedy stated that the raids "should outrage the conscience of all Americans." Senator William Saxton contended that Nixon had "taken leave of his senses." Vowing to force an end to the war, Senate Majority Leader Michael Mansfield termed the bombing "a Stone Age tactic." Democratic Representatives expressed like sentiments. On 2 January 1973, one day prior to the convening of Congress, the House Democratic Caucus voted 154 to 73 to cut off all funds for Southeast Asian military operations, contingent upon a prisoner release and the safe withdrawal of American troops. Two days later the Senate Democratic Caucus passed a similar measure, 36 to 12. Nixon approved Kissinger's plan to threaten future Linebacker-type assaults if the Communists again proved intransigent in Paris. Yet he warned Kissinger that "as far as our internal planning is concerned we cannot consider this to be a viable option."⁴³

SAC's large-scale participation in Linebacker II produced distinctive command and control problems that further limited the air campaign. Brigadier General Harry Cordes, SAC's Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, noted that 7th Air Force Commander General John W. Vogt "was furious that the B-52s had taken over the primary role and that SAC was selecting its own targets." Cordes maintained that Navy air commanders shared Vogt's attitude. The Joint Chiefs assigned 7th Air Force and

⁴²DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, p. 51; Nixon, RN, 2: 247.

⁴³Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1453, 1459; Nixon, RN, 2: 253-54.

Navy Task Force 77, located in the Tonkin Gulf, to escort the bombers. Vogt complained to Meyer on 24 December that the delay in receiving essential SAC information prevented 7th Air Force from providing proper escort. He demanded notice of targets, routes, axes of attack and call call signs a minimum of 18 hours prior to bomb release. Eighth Air Force planners also desired a quicker receipt of strike information. On 25 December, Meyer gave 8th Air Force authority to select axes of attack and withdrawal routes, yet he retained control over target selection. Major Thompson recalled the preliminary target list once arrived from Offutt three and a half hours prior to take-off, requiring the 8th Air Force staff to plan the mission in minimum time. Crews were waiting in their aircraft when they received their target packages.⁴⁴

Many crewmen cast bars at SAC Headquarters' direction, although for all members of Strategic Air Command Linebacker II was a new experience. Planners designed the campaign based on the five B-52 raids over the North in April that had produced no losses. Aside from those attacks, crews had minimal experience flying in a hostile environment. Major Clyde E. Bodenheimer, an 8th Air Force staff officer, recalled that the routine missions over South Vietnam without a threat "were not very exciting." In contrast, the first three days of Linebacker II were a shock. The number of daily sick call patients at Andersen's clinic rose from a pre-campaign average of 30-40 to 55-60. After 19 December crews at both Andersen and U-Tapao questioned aircraft routing at premission briefings. The Andersen Officers Club was perhaps the best indicator of Linebacker's effect on crews. Major Clark described the club's atmosphere as "uninteresting" and "desultory" before the raids. "By the second day [of Linebacker III], Clark reflected, "you would walk in there and you could smell the fear. Guys were

⁴⁴Letter, Corcoran to McCarthy, p. 2; Message, 7AF/CC to CINCSAC, 240725Z Dec 1972, in Message Traffic, June-December 1972; McCarthy and Allison, p. 121; Thompson interview, 27 October 1982.

hanging on each other and just revalidating the fact that they're still alive, and they were getting all that fear out in the open. . . ."⁴⁵

As in Linebacker I, enemy defenses were Linebacker II's most significant operational restriction. Whereas MiGs provided the greatest threat during the earlier Linebacker, 32 operational SAM sites furnished the Northern defensive punch in the "Eleven Day War." The Communists fired approximately 1000 SA-2 missiles, claiming all 15 B-52s lost and forcing the Air Force to change tactics. SAC Headquarters designed the simultaneous attacks on 26 December to saturate the North's command and control net plus minimize exposure to enemy fire. To guarantee that crews did not sacrifice the mutual ECM (Electronic Countermeasures) capability inherent in a three-ship cell formation, Colonel James M. McCarthy, Andersen's 43rd Strategic Wing Commander, threatened to court-martial any pilot who broke formation to evade SAMs. General Meyer reiterated this warning during his trip to Andersen shortly after Linebacker II ended. Still, some pilots continued evasive maneuvers, and Captain Allen recalled that "there were some of the goddamnedest gyrations I have ever seen done with B-52s to avoid the SAMs." In descending to evade the missiles, pilots risked being hit by AAA, although that damaged only one bomber. Northern fighters played an almost passive role during Linebacker II. Bomber crews reported few MiG attacks, none causing damage, while B-52 tail gunners downed two fighters. The North Vietnamese used MiGs as scouts, sending them aloft to report the bombers' heading, altitude, and air speed to SAM sites. A Russian trawler off Guam provided Hanoi with a seven-hour warning prior to missions from Andersen.⁴⁶

⁴⁵History of 307th Strategic Wing, October-December 1972, Vol. I, p. 58; Bodenheimer interview, 7 January 1983; Headquarters 8th Air Force, History of Eighth Air Force, 1 July 1972-30 June 1973, Vol. II, Narrative (23 August 1974), AFHRC, file number K520.01; Allen interview, 22 September 1981; Clark interview, 6 January 1983.

⁴⁶Major General Eugene L. Hudson, End of Tour Report (20 April 1973), AFHRC, file number K717.1404-42, p. 19; "Staff Meeting Notes," n. d. (probably 27 December 1972), AFHRC, file number K416.04-13, vol. 13; McCarthy and Allison, pp. 68, 129, 171; Letter to the author from Major James Rash (Ret), 15 August 1982; Allen interview, 22 September 1981; "Narrative by Major R. A. Scott, 21 October 1977," AFHRC, file number K416.04-13.

In addition to tactical variations, the Air Force adopted other methods to counter enemy defenses. An average of 85 support aircraft, performing Hunter-Killer, escort, and ECM duties, accompanied the bombers each night. On 23 December B-52s began striking SAM sites, and on the 28th they initiated raids against missile storage areas. During the latter stages of Linebacker, General Johnson restricted missions in high-threat zones to his D-model bombers possessing the latest ECM gear to deflect SAMs. The campaign started prior to the modification of many G-models, which suffered six of the 11 losses in the first four days. To assure an adequate number of fresh crews at U-Tapao, Johnson transferred 22 D-model crews there from Andersen after the Thai base received the brunt of the campaign on the 22nd. Because of the shorter missions, many U-Tapao crews had previously flown every night of Linebacker. Seventh Air Force reinstituted its program of daily mission critiques on 20 December. Representatives from both 7th and 8th Air Force attended the conferences, focusing on coordination between bombers and fighters as well as tactical countermeasures.⁴⁷

Weather proved almost as great an operational restraint as enemy defenses. Nixon ordered the assault in the midst of the winter monsoon season. While the adverse conditions had no effect on the all-weather B-52s, the monsoons severely limited bombing by fighters. The 11-day span produced only 12 daylight hours acceptable for precision attacks, occurring on the afternoons of 21, 27, and 28 December. F-111s supplemented Hunter-Killer strikes in poor weather, and B-52s raided some targets normally requiring precision ordnance. An Air Force study concluded that the "attempts to use all-weather systems against small area or point targets proved

⁴⁷McCarthy and Allison, pp. 42, 101, 109, 114, 121, 125, 147, 157, 164; History of Eighth Air Force, 1 July 1972-30 June 1973, Vol. II: Narrative, p. 426; Message 7AF to 7/13 AF Dep CC 210310Z Dec 1972, in Message Traffic, June-December 1972, AFHRC, file number K168.06-229.

valueless. . . These efforts . . . in retrospect should have been applied to area targets for maximum effect."⁴⁸

BOMBING RESULTS

DAMAGE INFLICTED

From 18-29 December 1972, B-52s flew 729 sorties against 34 targets north of the 20th parallel and dropped 15,237 tons of bombs. Combining for 1216 sorties, Air Force and Navy fighters delivered roughly 5000 tons of ordnance. Rail centers and storage areas received the lion's share of the B-52 effort. Bombers destroyed 383 pieces of rolling stock and inflicted 500 cuts in rail lines, completely disrupting rail traffic within ten miles of Hanoi. Aircraft also demolished 191 storage warehouses. Electric power generating capacity fell from 115,000 to 29,000 kilowatts, and the raids reduced POL supplies by one-fourth. In targeting only three bridges, air chiefs showed that Linebacker II was more than an interdiction campaign. They relied on interdiction during the previous Linebacker, as well as continued mining, to complement the December bombing's effect on resupply activities.⁴⁹

Compared to the damage inflicted, Linebacker II caused few civilian casualties, but it did unsettle the North's urban populace. Hanoi's mayor claimed 1,318 civilians killed and 1,216 wounded while Haiphong reported 305 dead. The low toll resulted both from B-52 targeting and evacuations. Acknowledging the raids' accuracy,

⁴⁸DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, p. 4; Linebacker II USAF Bombing Survey, p. 6; Air War--Vietnam (New York: Arno Press, 1978), p. 279; Headquarters PACAF, Corona Harvest: The USAF in Southeast Asia, 1970-73: Lessons Learned and Recommendations: A Compendium (16 June 1975), AFHRC, file number K717.0423-11, pp. 80, 95.

⁴⁹PACAF Study Group, "Linebacker II Air Operations," (Briefing given 18 January 1973) in Department of Air Force Letters concerning USAF Air Operations in Southeast Asia, 10 October 1972 to 31 January 1973, AFHRC, file number K168.06-232; Lieutenant General Gerald W. Johnson, End of Tour Report (15 September 1973), AFHRC, file number K416.131, p. 80; DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, pp. 6, 40; Linebacker II USAF Bombing Survey, pp. 12, 18, 34; McCarthy and Allison, p. 171; Martin M. Ostrow, "The B-52s' Message to Moscow," Air Force, April 1973, p. 3.

journalist Tammy Arbuckle observed during a trip to Hanoi in March 1973: "Pictures and some press reports had given a visitor the impression Hanoi had suffered badly in the war--but in fact the city is hardly touched." Evacuations from the capital occurred throughout Linebacker II. Writer Michael Allen, in Hanoi with Telford Taylor on Christmas day, watched numerous buses evacuating people to the countryside. Individuals remaining in Hanoi received only an hour or two of sleep a night, their nerves strained by the continual attacks. Foreigners in the Gia Lam airport discovered workers wandering around completely disoriented following a strike. American prisoners witnessed a more graphic consequence of Linebacker II. Commander James B. Stockdale, a prisoner for over seven years, recalled that

when the ground shook, and the plaster fell from the ceiling . . . the guards covered in the lee of the walls, cheeks so ashen you could detect it even from the light of the fiery sky. . . . By day, interrogators and guards would inquire about our needs solicitously. The center of Hanoi was dead--even though like our prisons, thousands of yards from the drop zone. We knew the bombers knew where we were, and felt not only ecstatically happy, but confident. The North Vietnamese didn't. . . . They knew they lived through last night, but they also knew that if our forces moved their bomb line over a few thousand yards they wouldn't live through tonight.⁵⁰

EFFECTIVENESS IN ACHIEVING POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

Less than one month after Linebacker II, Secretary of State William P. Rogers signed what Nixon considered "an honorable agreement."⁵¹ The campaign contributed substantially to both Hanoi and Saigon's acceptance of an accord. The "Eleven Day War" was not the only reason for a settlement, but it was a primary one.

⁵⁰Murray Marder, "North Vietnam: Taking Pride in Punishment," The Washington Post, 4 February 1973; Herz, p. 54; Tammy Arbuckle, "Bombing Was Pinpointed," The Washington Star, 1 April 1973; Michael Allen, "Sharing the Agony of Hanoi," The Christian Century, 24 January 1973, pp. 92-93; Linebacker II USAF Bombing Survey, p. 37; Address by Rear Admiral James B. Stockdale to the Armed Forces Staff College, 9 April 1975, quoted in U. S. Grant Sharp, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 258.

⁵¹Richard Nixon, "Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam. Address to the Nation, 23 January 1973," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 9 (29 January 1973), p. 44.

Nixon's threat of another Linebacker if the North refused to settle forced the Politburo to accept his terms. His promise of a future Linebacker should Hanoi violate the agreement, combined with the Congressional furor stemming from the raids, finally gained Thieu's support.

The fear of Linebacker II's renewal persuaded Hanoi to settle. Detente prevented the North from receiving increased Soviet assistance, and Hanoi had not fully recovered from Linebacker I. Bombing continued unabated against Northern troops in the South after Linebacker I ended, and Linebacker II destroyed many of the supplies stockpiled above the 20th parallel since 23 October. The survival of the Northern Army was essential if Hanoi was to maintain control over Southern territory. Linebacker II, combined with mining, threatened to paralyze that force by preventing necessary materiel from flowing to it.

While impressed by Linebacker II's destruction, the North Vietnamese were also impressed by its magnitude. In 11 days aircraft dropped 13 percent of the tonnage delivered during the five months of Linebacker I. Unlike the earlier campaign, Linebacker II continued night after night regardless of weather. Defenses failed to deter the attacks. Only when Hanoi promised to negotiate did the raids stop, and "the threat of renewed and effective bombing," an American negotiator recalled, "was implied in all that we signed with Hanoi." The Politburo could not afford to ignore that threat. Continued bombing would not only further disrupt an already disoriented populace, but also endanger its survival. The North lacked sufficient food reserves to endure a sustained air campaign. At the January Paris meetings, Kissinger observed that Le Duc Tho's "mood and businesslike approach was as close to October as we have seen since October. What has brought us to this point," he continued, "is the President's firmness and the North Vietnamese belief that he will not be affected by either

congressional or public pressures. Le Duc Tho has repeatedly made these points to me."⁵²

The havoc created by Linebacker II deterred Hanoi from its goal of an eleventh hour victory over the United States. After Linebacker I, the North Vietnamese repaired the rail lines leading to China, which resulted in a materiel influx. Guaranteed a short-term logistical base, Northern leaders then worked to delay an agreement. Hanoi perceived that Saigon's dissatisfaction with the October accord, together with the imminent return of Congress, provided a chance to achieve the triumph denied Giap's army. Realizing that Nixon would attempt to modify the October settlement, Politburo members aimed to prolong negotiations until Congress terminated the United States involvement. American withdrawal would allow Hanoi to renew military operations unhampered logistically, while a curtailment of support for the South would deplete its supply of American-made weaponry. Northern leaders believed that Thieu's government could not survive if abandoned by the United States, and they did not think that Nixon would willingly shun Saigon. Surmizing that the President might resume Linebacker I to spur talks, they ordered the evacuation of old people, women, and children from Hanoi on 4 December. In the midst of the winter monsoon season with sufficient materiel, the North Vietnamese felt secure against the resumption of fighter attacks north of the 20th parallel.⁵³

Northern leaders did not expect Linebacker II, and its magnitude tempered their response. On the eve of the assault, Radio Hanoi repeated Le Duc Tho's demand

⁵²Allan Goodman, The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), p. 157; Robert Thompson, Peace Is Not at Hand (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1974), p. 138; Kissinger quoted in Nixon, RN, 2: 257-58.

⁵³"North Viet Bombing Held Critical," Aviation Week and Space Technology, 3 March 1973, p. 13; DOD Appropriations: Bombings of North Vietnam, p. 4; Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1417, 1445-46; Nixon, RN, 2: 231; Captain (USN) H. E. Rutledge, "A POW View of Linebacker II," Armed Forces Journal International 115 (September 1977), p. 20; Herz, p. 19; Joseph Alsop, "Hanoi's Strategy Changed," The Washington Post, 24 January 1973.

that the United States sign the October agreement without further delay. Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thatch, North Vietnam's representative to the technical discussions accompanying Kissinger's private sessions, provided Hanoi's first reaction to the bombing. Kissinger termed Thatch's 20 December three-day adjournment of talks "a minimum gesture under the circumstances." Nguyen Minh Vy's 21 December denunciation of the raids at the public discussions also included a promise to renew talks on the 28th. Arriving in Washington on 26 December, Hanoi's call for a resumption of the Kissinger-Tho sessions prompted the National Security Advisor to comment: "We had not heard such a polite tone from the North Vietnamese since the middle of October." Nixon answered on the 27th with his conditions for a return to negotiations. The Politburo's acceptance arrived in Washington in 24 hours--"an amazing feat," Kissinger noted, "considering the time needed for transmission to and from Paris and the time differences."⁵⁴

While Hanoi's willingness to negotiate did not necessarily indicate a desire for an agreement, Northern actions in Paris revealed a commitment to end the war. At the 2 January technical session, State Department representative William Sullivan remarked that the Northern delegation "did not comport itself like a victorious outfit which had just defeated the U. S. Strategic Air Force." Le Duc Tho grandiloquently announced after arriving in Paris that he would make a final effort for a rapid settlement, a statement that Kissinger thought acknowledged Nixon's negotiating conditions. Yet the National Security Advisor related that his meeting with Tho on the 8th did not occur in the most cordial atmosphere. Tho bared his true intentions the next day. He told Kissinger that

in order to prove our seriousness and good will to find a rapid solution, we should adequately take into account each other's attitude. Naturally,

⁵⁴"North Vietnam's Statements on the Paris Talks, December 17 and 21, 1972," in Herz, p. 84; Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1457-59.

there should be mutual concessions and there should be reciprocity. If one keeps one's own stand then no settlement is possible.⁵⁵

To Kissinger, "it quickly became apparent that Tho had come to settle." The Northern delegate accepted the 23 November draft agreement, including the 12 concessions withdrawn in December. Tho further recognized Kissinger's stricter definition of the DMZ. By 13 January the technical advisors had completed the accord's text, and Nixon scheduled a halt to all bombing for the 15th. Reflecting on Hanoi's January motives, the National Security Advisor concluded: "It was a measure of the extremity in which Hanoi found itself that it felt it could not wait for the almost certain aid cutoff and proceeded with the negotiations."⁵⁶

In deciding to settle, Hanoi abandoned its attempt to score a belated success over the United States, but it did not surrender the goal of unifying Vietnam. The Politburo gambled that Nixon's commitment to "honor" prevented him from discarding many of Thieu's demands, and that the President's fear of public and Congressional denunciation forestalled a massive military response. The bid failed. Nixon answered Le Duc Tho's stalling with Linebacker II on 18 December. Soon afterwards, Hanoi learned of the President's ultimatum to Thieu.⁵⁷ By 29 December the North had exhausted its SAM supply, making further defense impossible. Linebacker's pummeling compelled the Politburo to negotiate, the only option that Nixon offered to continued attacks. Threatening to renew Linebacker if the Communists again proved intransigent, the President increased bombing below the 20th parallel. January bomber efforts against Giap's battered army jumped from 35 strikes a day to 50.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1461-63; Kissinger, "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam: News Conference, 24 January 1973," p. 69.

⁵⁶Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1463, 1463-64.

⁵⁷Nixon wrote: "There was no doubt that the Communists had infiltrated the Saigon government." See RN, 2: 240.

⁵⁸Johnson interview, 3 April 1973, p. 23.

Hanoi could ill-afford destruction of those forces that provided a base for future activity in the South. A negotiated agreement, however, presented the Politburo with three advantages. First and most important, a settlement would end American involvement, and the North could return to Truong Chinh's protracted war policy without interruption. Meanwhile, Congress might still curtail Saigon's funding. Second, an accord would "legally" permit Hanoi to maintain troops in the South. Finally, an agreement would involve minimal loss of face. Knowing that Nixon planned to settle regardless of Thieu's intentions, Northern leaders felt that they would concede nothing to Saigon by signing an accord. Hanoi's major concessions remained those surrendered to Kissinger in October, and the Politburo perceived that Thieu had minimal impact on the January terms.

At his 24 January news conference, Kissinger voiced approval of the agreement. "It is clear," he commented, "there is no legal way by which North Vietnam can use military force against South Vietnam." The National Security Advisor then added: "Now, whether that is due to the fact there are two zones temporarily divided by a provisional demarcation line or because North Vietnam is a foreign country with relation to South Vietnam--that is an issue which we have avoided making explicit in the agreement, and in which ambiguity has its merits."⁵⁹ In all likelihood the Politburo concurred.

Besides contributing to Hanoi's acceptance of Nixon's terms, Linebacker II spurred Thieu's endorsement of the January agreement. His approval did not come easily. Asserting that he could not accept Northern troops in the South, Thieu rejected the mid-December ultimatum carried by Haig. Nixon believed that a break with the Southern leader was justifiable, yet he hesitated to take such a step. "I was still reluctant to allow our annoyance with him to lead us to do anything that might bring

⁵⁹Kissinger, "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam: News Conference, 24 January 1973," p. 71.

about Communist domination of South Vietnam," the President later explained. On 5 January he again wrote Thieu, emphasizing that Hanoi's acceptance of the 15 December proposal would produce a settlement. Nixon warned that many Congressmen, angered by Linebacker II, would vote to stop Saigon's funding if Thieu spurned an accord. The President ended by reiterating his November pledge: "Should you decide, as I trust you will, to go with us, you have my assurance of continued assistance in the post-settlement period and that we will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by North Vietnam." Thieu's 7 January reply was noncommittal.⁶⁰

With the agreement's text completed, Nixon sent Haig to Saigon on 14 January in a final attempt to gain Thieu's approval. The general delivered a letter from the President that stated:

I have . . . irrevocably decided to proceed to initial the Agreement on January 23, 1973 and to sign it on January 27, 1973 in Paris. I will do so, if necessary, alone. In that case I shall have to explain publicly that your Government obstructs peace. The result will be an inevitable and immediate termination of U. S. economic and military assistance which cannot be forestalled by a change of personnel in your government.⁶¹

Arguing for Thieu's consent, the President again promised to react strongly if the North Vietnamese violated the agreement. On 17 January Thieu requested an additional negotiating session to secure changes. Nixon replied that further changes were impossible and demanded a final response from Thieu by the morning of 20 January. On that day the South Vietnamese President dispatched Foreign Minister Tram Van Lam to Paris to participate in the negotiations. Kissinger deemed this measure "a face-saving formula" indicating consent for the agreement.⁶²

Thieu's stalling resulted more from a desire to salvage prestige than from opposition to an accord. He had told his military chiefs in November to prepare for a cease-fire by Christmas. Haig departed Saigon in that month convinced Thieu knew

⁶⁰Nixon, *EN*, 2: 245-46; Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1459-62.

⁶¹Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1459.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 1470.

that total intransigence would lead to a loss of aid. The Southern leader realized that Nixon would not seek an agreement significantly improved over the October draft, although he also understood that Nixon's commitment to "honor" prevented the President from forsaking Saigon until the last possible moment. Similarly, Thieu's desire to demonstrate independence precluded an early acceptance of Nixon's terms. Linebacker II gave credibility to both the promise of continued American support and Nixon's willingness to use air power to uphold an agreement. The campaign further sparked a Congressional furor to end the war. Regardless of whether Congress would have ended Saigon's funding had Linebacker II not occurred, the uproar caused by the campaign made the termination of funds a virtual certainty if Thieu rejected a negotiated settlement. The Southern leader could not risk losing the backing that he considered essential for survival. Thus, Thieu acquiesced to the accord, but not before Nixon's deadline.⁶³

American civil and military leaders viewed Linebacker II as a successful application of military force. "The bombing had done its job," Nixon later remarked. Kissinger asserted that the air campaign "speeded the end of the war," adding "even in retrospect I can think of no other measure that would have." Many leaders believed that Linebacker II vindicated not only strategic bombing as a political tool but also the tenets of Air Force bombing doctrine. Senator Barry Goldwater announced in February 1973: "Let us hope that the strategic bombing lesson of the 12 days in December does not escape us as we plan for the future. Airpower, specifically strategic airpower, can be decisive when applied against strategic targets--industrial and military--in the heartland of the enemy regardless of the size of the nation." Admiral Moorer concurred, contending that "airpower, given its day in court after almost a decade of frustration, confirmed its effectiveness as an instrument of national power--in just nine and a half flying days." SAC generals Meyer and Johnson shared Moorer's

⁶³Nixon, RN, 2: 222-23; Kissinger, White House Years, pp. 1467-70.

opinion, as did 7th Air Force's General Vogt. Many air commanders likened Linebacker II to the Joint Chiefs' 94-target plan and concluded that such an effort in the spring of 1965 would have won the war.⁶⁴

The conviction that air power played the decisive role in gaining an agreement permeated the Air Force. Commanders cited crew member participation in Linebacker II on officer effectiveness reports. A recommendation from the 474th Tactical Fighter Wing for a Presidential Unit Citation stressed the F-111 wing's contribution to the campaign. The 30 June 1973 request stated: "They [aircrews] attacked vital targets in the enemy heartland, and were subjected to some of the most concentrated anti-aircraft defenses faced by US strike forces. Their efforts have directly assisted in securing peace with honor in Southeast Asia." Major Bodenheimer, who viewed the assault from 8th Air Force Headquarters, maintained that Linebacker II "was the single, most important action in the Vietnam campaign which convinced the North Vietnamese that they should negotiate." Major Clark felt that the operation in which he flew "was something that had been long overdue, because in an 11-day period we brought their [North Vietnam's] civilization . . . to a grinding, screeching halt." Clark did not, however, think that Linebacker II gained "peace with honor." "There was no way we could do that," he argued. "The fact that we retreated nullifies the words."⁶⁵

⁶⁴Nixon, *RN*, 2: 259; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1461; Barry Goldwater, "Air Power in Southeast Asia," *Congressional Record--Senate*, 119, part 5 (26 February 1973), p. 3346; "What Admiral Moorer Really Said about Airpower's Effectiveness in SEA," *Air Force*, November 1973, p. 25; Howard Silber, "SAC Chief: B-52s Devastated Viet Air Defenses," *Omaha World Herald*, 25 February 1973; Johnson interview, 3 April 1973, pp. 11-13; Vogt interview, 8-9 interview, 8-9 August 1978, p. 69; Sharp, pp. 252, 253, 272; William W. Momyer, *Air Power in Three Wars* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 339.

⁶⁵"Recommendation for Award of the Presidential Unit Citation to the 474th Tactical Fighter Wing, 30 June 1973," *Department of Air Force Letters concerning USAF Air Operations in SEA, 30 September 1972 to 28 August 1974*, AFHRC, file number K168.06-227; Bodenheimer interview, 7 January 1983; Clark interview, 6 January 1983.

Nixon disagreed with Clark's assessment and pointed to the provisions of the January accord. The settlement ended the United States' direct involvement in the war -- a primary goal since Johnson's 31 March 1968 bombing curtailment -- and gained the return of American prisoners. Despite Sir Robert Thompson's charge that after Linebacker II the North Vietnamese "would have taken any terms,"⁶⁶ Nixon's political goals during the January negotiations were the same as his objectives before the campaign. The President believed that Linebacker II helped achieve those aims. By highlighting the Congressional furor created by the bombing, he shrewdly used his negative political objective to secure Thieu's support. Moreover, the campaign improved South Vietnam's chances for survival as an independent, non-Communist state. That survival rested on American support, and, if necessary, the reapplication of air power. Commented Kissinger:

We had no illusions about Hanoi's long term goals. Nor did we go through the agony of four years of war and searing negotiations simply to achieve a "decent interval" for our withdrawal. We were determined to do our utmost to enable Saigon to grow in security and prosperity so that it could prevail in any political struggle. We sought not an interval before collapse, but lasting peace with honor.⁶⁷

The Linebacker campaigns assured that Hanoi would not soon attempt major military operations and thus permitted Vietnamization to strengthen the Southern army without interference. Nixon also thought that Linebacker boosted American prestige by demonstrating the United States' resolve to defend an ally.

Nixon's willingness to defend South Vietnam after Linebacker was never tested. When Giap's army crashed across the DMZ in March 1975, Nixon was no longer President and Congress precluded a military response. The peace that Linebacker helped gain proved but an interval.

⁶⁶Robert Thompson in *The Lessons of Vietnam*, eds. W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell (New York: Crane, Russak, and Company, 1977), p. 105.

⁶⁷Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1470.

CHAPTER VII

EPILOGUE

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is [rightly to understand] the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

Carl von Clausewitz¹

Strategic aerospace offense objectives are to neutralize or destroy an enemy's war-sustaining capabilities or will to fight. Aerospace forces may conduct strategic aerospace offense actions, at all levels of conflict, through the systematic application of force to a selected series of vital targets.

Air Force Manual 1-1, 16 March 1984²

The air campaigns against North Vietnam differed in their effectiveness as instruments of national policy, and the political objectives guiding the offensives contributed to the disparity of results. President Lyndon Johnson turned to air power to help achieve his positive goal of an independent, stable, non-Communist South Vietnam. At the same time, his negative objectives--to prevent a Third World War and to keep both domestic and world public attention focused away from Vietnam--limited Rolling Thunder. Johnson believed that carefully-controlled bombing would ultimately compel Hanoi to end the war by making it too costly. Yet many of his advisers, who had a significant impact on Rolling Thunder's development, viewed bombing as a compromise means to achieve disparate ends. On the eve of the first

¹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter J. Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 88-89.

²Air Force Manual 1-1, 16 March 1984, p. 3-2.

Rolling Thunder mission, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy argued that bombing would bolster South Vietnamese morale; Ambassador Maxwell Taylor asserted that it would break Hanoi's will to fight; Secretary of State Dean Rusk maintained that it would secure bargaining leverage; and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara contended that it would convey America's political resolve to Hanoi. Additional reasons for bombing appeared once the campaign began.

President Richard Nixon's objectives in Vietnam were different than his predecessor's. Nixon's positive political goal was an American withdrawal that did not abandon the South to an imminent Communist takeover, and that aim was easier to attain than a stable South capable of independently preserving its existence. Even after he decided to court Southern President Nguyen Van Thieu, Nixon's positive goals remained more limited than Johnson's. Nixon's chief counselor on Vietnam, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, agreed that bombing was necessary to secure those objectives, and the President did not allow other advisors to influence the Linebacker campaigns. Negative goals had a marginal impact on Nixon's application of air power. His detente with the Chinese and Soviets removed the threat of an expanded conflict, and the success of the Moscow summit, the continued departure of American ground troops, and the blatant nature of the Easter Offensive assured him of public support for Linebacker I. Although he took pains to keep that backing, he possessed a large measure of freedom to intensify the bombing. By December 1972 one primary negative aim--to end the war before the return of Congress--limited his application of air power, and he made use of that goal to heighten Linebacker II's effect on Thieu.

In the final analysis, Nixon's bombing was more effective than Johnson's because it was more threatening to North Vietnam's vital concerns. The lack of negative objectives allowed Nixon to expand the bombing until it threatened to wreck Hanoi's capability to fight by rendering its army impotent. Yet to assume that a Rolling Thunder unrestrained by political controls would have compelled Hanoi to end the

conflict is to misunderstand both the nature of the Vietnam War prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive and the fundamental tenets of American strategic bombing doctrine.

Before the Tet Offensive, the Southern war was a guerrilla conflict. Viet Cong units composed five-sixths of the Communist army and intermingled with the local populace. Together with North Vietnamese troops, they fought an average of one day in 30. The infrequency of combat produced external supply needs of only 34 tons of materiel daily, and no amount of bombing could stop this meager amount from reaching the South. In truth, Rolling Thunder could have affected Northern war-making capacity only by attacking two targets: people and food. The destruction of either Northern population centers or its agricultural system would have had a minimal impact on the war in the South, however. Whereas the threatened destruction of these targets during the Korean War had helped produce peace in 1953, Vietnam differed significantly from the earlier conflict. President Dwight Eisenhower's threat of nuclear holocaust was effective because it portended defeat for the Communists fighting in Korea; the prospect of North Vietnam's ruin did not guarantee a South Vietnamese victory. Had bombing raised the threshold of pain sufficiently so that Hanoi stopped backing the Viet Cong and ordered an end to the insurgency, the Viet Cong could still have refused to comply with Hanoi's wishes; the cessation of Northern support was no guarantee that Saigon could survive against the Viet Cong.

While the absence of negative political aims in 1965 would have generated an air campaign without political controls, the air chiefs' doctrinal and moral beliefs would have likely prevented unrestrained bombing. As a result of Air Corps Tactical School training, World War II experience, and postwar planning, air chiefs believed that by attacking an enemy's economic vital centers they could destroy its war-making capability, which would in turn produce the loss of social cohesion and will to fight. The emphasis on wrecking industry persisted throughout Rolling Thunder. Underlying this doctrinal conviction were moral reservations about killing civilians.

Although air leaders in World War II and Korea had begun direct attacks on morale, they had done so reluctantly, and only after attacks on capability failed to yield the desired results. In all cases, their attacks on will had come against targets also having a military value. The same was true in Vietnam. Despite the postwar claims of many air chiefs that they would have flattened Hanoi if given the opportunity, such assertions lack credibility. Historian Ronald Schaffer's observation that American air commanders in World War II "based military decisions at least partly on moral concerns" is a valid conclusion regarding air leaders in Vietnam as well.³ In all likelihood, the moral inhibitions of commanders will limit future American air offensives.

Nixon's Linebacker campaigns were effective political instruments not only because they lacked stringent political controls but also because the war's nature changed in 1972. After the Viet Cong's mauling in the 1968 Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese Army was the only military force capable of achieving the Politburo's goal of unification. Northern leaders strengthened that force for a massive invasion that they believed would overwhelm the South. In contrast to the stagnant conventional war in Korea from 1951 to 1953, in which bombing was of marginal utility, Hanoi's Easter Offensive was an all-out, conventional assault that made its army vulnerable to air power. For the first time in Vietnam, bombing conformed to Clausewitz's "principle of polarity": it attacked an objective that was essential for a Communist victory. Doctrine and morality, Rolling Thunder's two most significant military controls, now suited the conflict. In addition, laser-guided munitions enhanced bombing efficiency, and the Easter Offensive came just before the peak period of favorable flying weather. As long as Hanoi waged an unrestrained conventional war, Linebacker threatened

³Ronald Schaffer, Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. xi. I disagree, however, with Schaffer's contention that "moral constraints almost invariably bowed to what people described as military necessity..." (p. xii)

much more than the North's ability to win; it also jeopardized the North's ability to defend itself.

Despite the differences in the war in 1965 and 1972, many air chiefs have viewed the conflict as a single entity in which both its nature and American objectives remained constant. When asked in July 1986 if the United States could have won in Vietnam, retired General Curtis LeMay answered, "In any two-week period you want to mention." He elaborated:

You can remember what went on at the end, when the B-52s finally went up north and started to bomb up there. They bombed for about seven days, and the white flag practically went up. President Nixon stopped it right there to get our people out. Four or five more days would have ended the whole thing, but I think he was so disgusted and fed up with the opposition of the American people that he decided to just get the hell out of there, and that was it.⁴

LeMay's perception of Vietnam mirrors that of Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp and Air Force General William W. Momyer in their postwar examinations of the air campaigns against the North.⁵ It also reflects that of retired Army Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. in On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War.⁶ Summers asserts that the conflict became a conventional war when the North Vietnamese began sending troops south in 1964, and that the United States should have focused totally on destroying Hanoi's capacity to fight. He believes that the North Vietnamese, not the Viet Cong, were the primary enemy, yet he omits the number of Viet Cong troops in the South prior to 1968. His answer to America's failure is that more force was necessary sooner to wreck Hanoi's war-making capability. While Summers focuses on ground combat, many air

⁴Interview of Curtis LeMay by Mary-Ann Bendel, printed in USA Today, 23 July 1986, p. 9A.

⁵U. S. Grant Sharp, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978); William W. Momyer, Air Power in Three Wars (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1978).

⁶Harry G. Summers, Jr., On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982).

commanders accept his view of the war. His book is a text at both the Air Force's Air Command and Staff College and the Air War College.

Reinforcing the conviction that the war was homogeneous is an almost universal Air Force perception that political controls prevented air power from displaying its effectiveness until December 1972. An August 1986 article on Vietnam in Air Force magazine, the publication of the Air Force Association, contained the following introduction:

In mid-1964, Air Force and Navy airmen began fighting for approval of a large-scale air campaign against strategic targets in North Vietnam in order to end the war quickly. But timorous military amateurs who were setting policy in Washington both feared unlikely Chinese intervention and believed that close support of ground forces was the way to victory. It was not until eight years, thousands of lives, and billions of dollars later that a major air campaign in the North--Linebacker II--was approved, leading to a cease fire in eleven days.⁷

This commentary not only implies that victory would have resulted from executing the Joint Chiefs' 94-target scheme, but that the President should have given military leaders free rein to apply air power as they saw fit. Sharp makes precisely this point in his account of the air war: "Our air power did not fail us," he proclaims, "it was the decision makers. . . . Just as I believe unequivocally that the civilian authority is supreme under our Constitution, so I hold it reasonable that, once committed, the political leadership should seek, and in the main, heed the advice of the military professionals in the conduct of military operations."⁸ Like the majority of Vietnam air chiefs, Sharp participated in World War II, and that conflict has colored his thoughts--and those of many others--on Vietnam. Many air leaders continue to see unconditional surrender as the proper objective in war. "Once you're in a war, or you've made the decision to use military force to solve your problems, then you ought to use it," LeMay reiterated in 1986.⁹ The current edition of Air Force Manual 1-1, Basic Doctrine,

⁷John L. Frisbee, "Practice of Professionalism," Air Force, August 1986, p. 113.

⁸Sharp, p. xvii.

⁹LeMay interview, USA Today.

stresses the perceived need for unbridled air power by quoting Italian Air Marshal Giulio Douhet: "The employment of land, sea, and air forces in time of war should be directed towards one single aim: VICTORY. . . . The commander[s] of the Army, Navy, and Air Force should be given the greatest freedom of action in their respective sphere. . . ."10

Because most air chiefs think that political limitations prevented air power from gaining a victory in Vietnam, they have not revamped the fundamentals of strategic bombing doctrine. Their unspoken belief is that since Linebacker II demonstrated bombing effectiveness, political leaders must realize that bombing can win limited wars if unhampered by political controls. Yet most fail to understand that the "Eleven Day War" was a unique campaign for very limited ends, and its success stemmed from the destruction wrought by the previous Linebacker, Nixon's masterful diplomacy, and North Vietnamese fears that continued bombing would paralyze the army with which they persisted in waging a conventional war to gain territory. Instead of noting the polarity created by both Linebackers, air leaders point to Rolling Thunder as an example of how disregarding such principles of war as mass and surprise can lead to failure. Manual 1-1 states: "Aerospace doctrine flows from these principles and provides mutually accepted and officially sanctioned guidelines to the application of these principles in warfare."¹¹ Chief among these "guidelines" is the notion that destroying a "selected series of vital targets" will result in the loss of an enemy's war-making capacity or will to fight. Vital targets include, according to Manual 1-1, "concentrations of uncommitted elements of enemy armed forces, strategic weapon systems, command centers, communications facilities, manufacturing systems, sources of raw material, critical material stockpiles, power systems, transportation systems, and key agricultural areas."¹² Six of these ten targets are components of a

¹⁰Air Force Manual 1-1, 16 March 1984, p. 2-1.

¹¹Ibid., p. 2-5.

¹²Ibid., p. 3-2.

nation's industrial apparatus, while three are components of its military establishment. Although agriculture is listed, past campaigns demonstrate that air chiefs would probably avoid attacks producing widespread starvation. The conviction that the manufacture and distribution of goods are the keys to war-fighting capability and will remain firmly planted as a cornerstone of Air Force thinking.

Air power was ineffective throughout the Johnson era of the Vietnam War because both civilian and military leaders possessed preconceived ideas that affected its application. Much like European political and military leaders in 1914, American officials in Vietnam encountered a war that differed from experience and expectations. Having reached political maturity in the atmosphere of the Cold War and witnessed Chinese intervention in Korea, Johnson and his advisors could not avoid a cautious approach to escalation in Vietnam. In addition, they had seen a Soviet retreat in Cuba that stemmed from the threat of air power, and they believed that a similar threat in Vietnam would ultimately deter Northern aggression. Air leaders thought that air power, applied against an enemy's war-making capability, could make a--if not the--key contribution to victory. As a result of these perceptions, Johnson and his advisors never defined a clear military objective for air power, and the objective that air chiefs themselves defined did not mesh with the President's political goals or the nature of the war. That prewar thinking had such a significant impact on Rolling Thunder is in retrospect regrettable, but understandable, given the intensity of the beliefs.

Difficult to fathom is the air chiefs' lingering conviction that their doctrine was right throughout Vietnam--and that it is right for the future. "Airpower can be strategically decisive if its application is intense, continuous, and focused on the enemy's vital systems," Momyer concludes in his analysis of American air operations since 1941.¹³ Unlike generals after World War I, post-Vietnam air commanders have advocated no sweeping doctrinal changes. They parade Linebacker II as proof that

¹³Momyer, p. 339.

bombing will work in limited war, and they dismiss the notion that too much force could trigger nuclear devastation. Yet no matter how remote the threat of nuclear war, American political leaders must respect that threat if fighting an enemy with superpower backing. Vietnam's political controls were no anomalies; Hiroshima has made them a standard feature of war in the modern era. For the Air Force, the guerrilla struggle during most of the Vietnam War was an unacknowledged anomaly that may well reappear. If it does, military controls would likely again limit air power's efficacy as a political tool. Bombing doctrine remains geared to a fast-paced conventional war, and the conviction that such doctrine is appropriate for any kind of conflict permeates the service. Until air commanders and civilian officials alike realize that air power is unlikely to provide either "cheapness" or "victory" in a guerrilla war--and that success in such a conflict may well equate to stalemate--the prospect of an aerial Verdun will endure.

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